

ECOCHURCH: A VISION FOR CHURCHES
IN PURSUIT OF ECOLOGICAL EXISTENCE

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by
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This professional project completed by

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has been presented to and accepted by
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

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According to Jürgen Moltmann, it is the responsibility of the church at each moment to determine and clearly state its situation, its commission, and its goal.¹ This project is an attempt to take seriously this responsibility given our both novel and precarious ecological moment. Working at the intersections of ecology, theology, and biblical hermeneutics, the project develops an ecclesiological vision built around the concrete work of fostering ecological existence. This work is about moving in the world in such a way that new spaces for life to flourish are opened. It moves us beyond the modern religious preoccupation with anthropocentric existential authenticity to biotic communitarian sustainability.

This shift begins with an honest look into our current ecological moment, which climate science calls the Anthropocene. This is a *kairotic* moment where humanity has become a geologic force and it is currently bent toward the reductive and destructive. With this great power comes great responsibility. Leading environmental activist Bill McKibben says, “We’re running Genesis backward, decreating.”² It is to this responsibility and this problem that this project provides a theological and ecclesiological response.

The project plunges into the fields of ecotheory and theology as it considers the commission of the church given this situation. The heart of this analysis is an embrace of the

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1.

² Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough Planet* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2011), 25.

ecothological shift from dualism and difference to relatedness and connection. This shift emerges through a survey of the dynamic field of ecotheology as represented in the works of McFague, Keller, Gebara, Murphy, and Harris. It is grounded in the biblical tradition, which centers the historic church, with a close reading of creation theology. This reading argues for a movement from a traditional creation theology of *ex nihilo* to an ecological *creatio ex Deo*. The heart of this argument is constructed from a comparative analysis of the Babylonian creation narrative, the *Enuma Elish*, and the Hebrew creation narrative of Genesis 1. Creation out of God means the divine milieu of endless love expressed in ever deepening differentiated unity forms the ecosystem into which the drama of human existence and praxis unfolds. A deep theological ecology cannot be reduced to the ethical. It signals a novel ontology. It is about being and what is. All materiality is enmeshed in God and God is enmeshed in all materiality. This invites new forms of ecclesial reflection and life.

These new forms come to expression in feminist and revolutionary ecclesiological visions. Emerging from a panentheistic and liberative ecotheology these visions are a reminder that ecoecclesiology must attend to both human-to-human relationality as well as human-to-all-biotic-existence relationality. This project explores the diverse field of feminist ecclesiology through listening to the voices of Schüssler Fiorenza, Jones and Watson. In drawing the insights of this tradition together, this reminds ecochurches of the importance of issues of justice and equality. If this does not begin with human-to-human relationships, it will not translate to human-to-non-human relationships. With this reminder, the project turns to the social aspect of an ecoecclesiology as it develops the idea of a revolutionary ecclesiology capable of the social transformation that is always embedded in an ecological vision.

The project concludes with ecoecclesiology considered ethnographically in practice in four different communities of faith, that is to say four different ecochurches. The thread that binds these churches is that each are engaged in the planting and tending of community gardens. This simple material change in space has brought ecological life-giving transformation to each community. This is the first impulse of ecochurches – the transformation of physical space in ecologically informed ways. The second is the impulse to get your hands dirty. This is not ministry from afar. It is up close and personal. It is rooted in the life and needs of local community. The third impulse is toward reconnecting. As ecochurches reconnect with the soil, they are pushed outward to build partnerships and networks around shared values. Ecochurch is not an island but instead one plant in a permaculture garden of sustainability and justice organically connected to other groups of common cause. The fourth impulse of ecochurches is toward the ecological rhythm of planting, growing, and spreading. They begin small, like a seed. They start as one garden bed, but then they grow in unexpected and unpredictable ways. They do not over plan. They seek to cultivate what is right in front of them. They are more wild meadow than factory farm. In the end, ecochurches are being pulled toward the eschatological vision at the end of the book of Revelation where there is a life-giving watershed and an orchard with trees upon which hang leaves for the healing of the world.

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S. D. G.

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*For Harold, Luz, and Wesley.
You are loved.*

INTRODUCTION

The Liturgy of Toilets

The inspiration for this project began in a bathroom with a toilet in Oak View, California. I know, not the sexiest of locations, but I'm continually discovering that the ecospirit shows up in unexpected places. It blows where it will. Let me explain.

This was the early 2010s and I had recently returned from living and teaching in Honduras. I had spent a couple of years as a tenth grade English teacher at the International School of Tegucigalpa. This experience broadened my horizons on life and culture immensely. During my time in Honduras, I finished my master's degree in theology. Returning to Southern California, I stumbled into two different jobs. I began working as a Direct Support Professional providing job training and life skills to adults with intellectual disabilities. At the same time, I started as a Youth Worker at a United Methodist Church in Long Beach.

I was working with people in both jobs, something I love, but I was in search of something more. I had this passion for theology and for people burning within me. This was animated by the call of my Christian faith to follow in the loving and justice making way of Jesus. I was drawn to both critical intellectual reflection and community rooted action. I felt at home in seminary and in church. Yet, despite this existential connection within me, I felt that there was this divide between the two. The theory from the academy seemed far removed from the life of the church and the praxis of the church seemed far removed from the questions of the academy. In the academy, I learned about the systemic and structural. We dealt with theory and ideas. The church was much more interested in the personal and the practical. I wondered what this meant for me trying to survive, thrive, and be faithful right where I was.

It seemed to me that Jesus brought these two strands together and I wanted to do the same, but I wasn't entirely sure how to do that. So, I went in search of a mentor. I wanted to find someone who could show me a way forward. I was looking for someone deep in the trenches of community work as well as conversant and articulate in the theory. This led me to Ched Myers, a biblical scholar, theological animator, and community activist working at the intersection of seminary, sanctuary, streets, and soil.³ I remembered reading his commentary on Mark called *Binding the Strong Man*. This book changed how I read the bible. I looked him up online and decided I needed to go meet this scholar-activist. I signed up for one of his weeklong intensive learning institutes in the spring of 2013. The theme for the event was the Occupy Movement and Luke's Special Section. It wed together social justice praxis and critical biblical scholarship. This was the exact space to which I had been feeling drawn.

The institute was called the Bartimaeus Institute and it was a beautiful blend of critical reflection, artistic expression, community organizing, and generous hospitality. I realized that I had been searching for church and here among an eclectic group of scholars and students, activists and pastors, theists and a/theists, I found it. I also found something else that I had not been looking for. I found a bathroom with a liturgy that would change things for me. In Ched's house, the toilet had a sign above it that read something like this, "If it's yellow let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down. Thanks for helping us to care for the earth. It's the only one we have." Next to the toilet was a bucket with grey water for flushing as needed. This bucket was filled with water that came from the bowl in the sink that caught the water used to wash your hands after using the toilet. This simple and practical ecoliturgy of the toilet helps to support a more sustainable bathroom ecosystem. It is a small thing but rooted in a particular ecotheology. It is

³ For more information about Ched Myers see, www.chedmyers.org.

easy to follow and changes things just a little. Most importantly, it made me wonder for the first time about the connection between my faith and my place, between my theology and my ecology. An ecoliturgy of the toilet, which changed a bathroom to be little more sustainable, became the impetus for a personal spiritual journey that has led to this work of ecoecclesiology. My hope is that as this small ecoliturgy changed this one bathroom to be a little more sustainable that this project might help change churches in a similar way, to be a little more ecologically sustainable and resilient, in the face of our planet's current ecological crisis.

The Trajectory

More and more data about the current global ecological situation comes pouring in each day from the scientific community. It paints an unequivocal picture about our world situation. The planet we call home has been fundamentally altered at the deepest level. This altering comes from the work of our own hands. We have transitioned to what scientists are now calling the Anthropocene epoch – a new geological era marked by humanity's reshaping of the earth's ecosystems. The recognition is that modern humanity has become a geological force. Current modes of production coupled with a culture of endless consumption drive the need for copious amounts of energy produced through the burning of massive amounts of fossil fuels, which in turn emits massive amounts of carbon, a dangerous greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere. This human driven global warming is having disastrous ecological effects. Leading environmental activist Bill McKibben says, "We're running Genesis backward, decreating."⁴ The world is in crisis. A profound threat looms over the biotic community, the human family included. This is the world context that the church in the early twenty-first century must come to terms with and act in light of. This is the stage upon which the *ecclesia* is called to act.

⁴ Bill McKibben, *Eaarth*, 25.

According to theologian Jürgen Moltmann, it is the responsibility of the church at each moment to determine and clearly state its situation, its commission, and its goal.⁵ Putting this responsibility against the backdrop of the Anthropocene moment, it is necessary that these determinations be reformulated from an ecological perspective. These reformulations are what I call an ecoecclesiology. This project begins to map this emerging ecoecclesiology rhizomatically by drawing from the fields of ecotheory, theological ecology, feminist ecclesiology, and social activism. It develops lines of ecclesiological discourses oriented toward creating communities of ecological existence. These are communities committed to the synergistic causes of environmental sustainability and social justice. Taking seriously the importance of the hermeneutical circle within theological reflection, the project explores four concrete expressions of this ecclesiology in action in local ecclesial contexts.

The project looks to move beyond a common bifurcation in ecoecclesiological thinking that locates the ecological in a second layer area of discourse relating to the ethics of the church as opposed to locating it as a first order ontological discursive concern. A prevalent way of thinking about the relationship between ecclesiology and ecology within ecotheological discourse has tended toward the employment of dualistic ethical terms. This means that environmental justice is framed as an ethical imperative for the church to do. Ruether argues along these lines in her essay “Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church’s Mission” when she writes, “Here I wish to show...that the Church’s mission of redemption of the world cannot be divorced from justice in society or from healing the wound of nature wrought by an

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1.

exploitative system.”⁶ Ecology is here placed within the secondary idea of ecclesial mission and not the primary notion of ecclesial identity. This project looks to move beyond this bifurcation and away from ethics toward ontology and questions of being. What does it mean for the church to be, to exist at its core as, an ecological community? The question of ecclesial identity is at the center here. The ontological work is the ethical work in this perspective. It is not that one comes after the other.

The work of Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons in their book *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* represents a significant foray into the thrust of this project. There is a formal logic in their work that provides a model for connecting academic discourse with transformative praxis for the real world. This logic is built on the work of philosopher Charles Taylor in his text *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Dalton and Simmons use Taylor’s notion that the exercises of writing, educating, and working in a particular academic field over an extended period of time function to create legitimacy for ideas, which in turn, “have been subtly shifting the interplay of understandings and practices that have broadly shared moral legitimacy.”⁷ In other words, they represent a movement in the “social imaginary” that determine possibilities for praxis. Using this paradigm, Dalton and Simmons forward the thesis that the work of ecotheology represents a practice of hope.⁸ This connection between the theoretical and the practical is significant for this project’s aim of connecting the ecotheological and the ecclesiological insofar as the former is theory and the latter a praxis. The task can be understood as a reworking of what one might call the ecclesial imaginary in order to open up new

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church’s Mission,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 603.

⁷ Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), ix.

⁸ Dalton and Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, ix.

possibilities for church formation and reformation in distinctly ecological ways. It is in this space that the project seeks to work.

The focus of the ecclesiological work for this project will be on contemporary interpretations of the church. Moltmann and Ruether remain here as important interlocutors as well as feminist ecclesiology and revolutionary ecclesiology, more generally speaking. The broad field of ecclesiology has many entry points. The project will focus on interpretations of church that create a space for intersection with ecological thinking. Open community, radical connection, and deep relationship are examples of categories where this intersection might occur.

Hauerwas opens his book on ecclesiology, *In Good Company*, by writing, “Christianity is connections...to be a Christian is to be joined, to be put in connection with others so that our stories cannot be told without somehow telling their stories.”⁹ The notion of radical connection is in the forefront. He will go on to interpret the church as an alternative *polis*, or community, that embodies an alternative way of being in the world.¹⁰ This theological politics opens up the possibility for both separatist and ecological interpretations. If the church is its own distinct community, then how can it be understood as embedded in the radically connected systems of ecology? The challenge will be navigating this tension. It will be working to frame the connection with others beyond simply the anthropological. It is about being joined in such a way that our stories cannot be told without telling the story of all of creation.

This project is oriented toward the constructive aim of presenting an ecoecclesiology; as such, it creates specific limitations in terms of subject matter and content. Ecclesiological concerns will be the lens through which ecotheory, theology, and biblical hermeneutics is

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), xiii.

¹⁰ Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 6.

considered. The goal is to touch upon a certain depth of reflection that might fuel the ecclesiological imaginations of pastors, parishioners, and practitioners. The conversation partners have been curated with the practical concern of creating a creative discursive palate for use by churches seeking to cultivate ecological existence in mind. The aim is not to exhaust the subject, but to open it up in fresh ways for new audiences.

The methods used for this project's line of inquiry include library research of germane theoretical resources and ethnographic field study of Christian faith communities embracing and embodying a lived ecoecclesiology. The hope is that the project will be a conceptual foray into the work of breaking down the separation between things like theology and ecology, theory and praxis, church and world. It is a resource for churches and pastors looking to be church in ways that are relevant, compelling, and transformative at the close of the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1- Framing the Conversation: A Consideration of Ecological Context, Theory, and Practice

This opening chapter explores the context of ministry for the church in an ecological age. It considers the current moment through the lens of climatological narratives and sociological reception and construction of these narratives. In other orders, it asks, what is the ecological story being told and then how is it heard and used within communities. After this parsing of the conversation, a fourfold discursive framework is constructed as a lens for generative conversation and praxis that fosters an ecological existence that is biocentric. This is the theory that relates to practice as churches move toward new formations as ecochurches. Finally, the

chapter briefly examines Ecovillages and the Watershed Discipleship movement as avant-garde examples of communities that foster this new ecological existence.

Chapter 2- Creatio Ex Deo: A Deep Theological Ecology

This chapter begins with a survey of ecotheology by way of the works of Sallie McFague, Ivone Gebara, Timothy Murphy, Catherine Keller, and Melanie L. Harris. It then plunges deep into the biblical creation narrative of Genesis 1 by putting it in conversation with ancient Babylonia's *Enuma Elish*. Drawing inspiration and guidance from Keller's *tehomitic* theology, the chapter provides a close reading of these stories in search of a deep theological ecology capable of fueling the theological imagination of the church toward ecological existence. This involves a critique of *creatio ex nihilo* as the foundation for destructive anthropocentric theological ecologies that create hierarchy, devalue creation, and see the world through the metaphor of machine. The chapter argues for the notion of *creatio ex Deo*, creation out of God, as the foundation for a deep theological ecology that reconnects all things through a creative advance of multiplicity and differentiation. Following McFague, creation is not machine in this perspective but "the body of God." The spiritual practice connected to this theological move toward *creatio ex Deo* is ecoliteracy as a way of drawing into the Divine through creation.

Chapter 3- Feminist Ecclesiology for Ecochurches

This chapter examines the field of feminist ecclesiology as a source of wisdom for the ecclesiological development of ecochurches. By mapping the ecclesiologies of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Serene Jones, and Natalie K. Watson, a vision of the church rooted in an ecological hermeneutic that is oriented toward embodied inclusion and broad justice emerges.

An ecoecclesiology must attend to both human-to-human relationality as well as human-to-all-biotic-existence relationality. The importance of story, embodiment, grace, and diversity anchors feminist ecclesiology and must be taken into account by the developing ecochurch ethos.

Chapter 4- Revolutionary Ecclesiology for Ecochurches

The severity of the current ecological moment demands a radical response that gets to the root of things. This chapter works to build a revolutionary ecclesiology by engaging the very concrete social issue of economic injustice, specifically that of wage theft. This is an area of praxis that I have engaged with as a faith leader during my time in Long Beach. The idea present in this chapter is that the ecological must attend also to the social. They are two sides of the same coin. An ecological ecclesiology rooted in a deep theological ecology cannot retreat into some non-social space in nature because this fails to recognize that no such space exists. Ecology always includes the social. It is all contained within the whole. Drawing on narrative cultural analysis, this ecclesiological component is developed in conversation between my pastoral-activist work, the academic theologies of Jürgen Moltmann, Joerg Rieger, and Kwok Pui-lan, the cultural artifacts of the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *The Hunger Games* books, and a revolutionary interpretation of Jesus from the biblical text.

Chapter 5- Ecochurch in Practice

This final chapter explores what ecochurch looks like in lived communities of faith. Ecochurches work from a new ecoscript to understand who they are and what they are called to be and do. Ethnographic field work undertaken for the project is shared here that gives examples of four Southern California ecochurches – North Oxnard United Methodist Church, Holy

Nativity Episcopal Church, Throop Unitarian Universalist Church, and Love in Motion. From an examination of these four faith communities four impulses of ecochurches are delineated – (1) transformation of physical space, (2) a stress on getting your hands dirty, (3) reconnecting ecologically and socially, and (4) continued growth. In the end, ecochurches embrace a hermeneutic of sacredness that sees the Divine Life beating and pulsing in all things.

CHAPTER 1

Framing the Conversation: A Consideration of Ecological Context, Theory, and Practice

Introduction

This chapter proceeds in three movements as it works to frame the trajectory of this project in ecoecclesiological exploration. The first movement probes our current ecological moment through the lens of current climatological narratives and their sociological interpretations and reception. It pushes toward the importance of non-dual and materially-rooted expressions of embodied ecotheology to sustain the needed transformative and revolutionary praxis invited by the moment. The second movement offers a fourfold conceptual framework, as soil for communities engaged in the work of cultivating ecological existence, that is needed given the realities of our current ecological moment. The ingredients of this framework are: narrative rescripting, revolutionary ends, policy transformation, and a politics of place[ment]. The third movement offers an overture to what an ecotheory can look like as praxis when it is lived in the context of community. Ecovillages and the Watershed Discipleship movement are offered as two productive templates for ecological community.

First Movement: The Situation

This section attempts to articulate the current ecological situation by exploring the concept of climate change in its dual nature as both a climatological narrative and a sociological phenomenon. It pursues this through considering and analyzing resistance to the concept. It ends with conceptual deconstruction in order to open space for creative theories and practices aimed toward the construction of an ecological civilization.

Attempts to obfuscate the reality of our current environmental situation abound. Most of these attempts center around the concepts of global warming and climate change. Global warming is a slightly older term referring to the aggregate rise of planetary temperature over the last one hundred or so years. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, global temperature has risen 1.4° F over the last hundred years and is on pace to rise anywhere from 2 to 11.5° F over the next one hundred years.¹¹ Climate change, a slightly newer and more refined term, encompasses the general premise of global warming but is more nuanced as it emphasizes the effects of global temperature rise on local environments. Climate change recognizes that the rise of global temperature is not equally distributed across the globe. Instead, dryer more arid environments are getting both dryer and hotter while continuing to expand. This process is known as desertification. In turn, colder and wetter regions are getting more concentrated and shorter seasons of more extreme cold and rain. Overall, climate change has led to a rise in extreme weather conditions and phenomena. Bill McKibben, citing a New York Times article, notes that the last quarter of the 20th century had four times as many weather-related disasters as the first 75 years of the century.¹² This is a trend that is continuing into our current century.

Those who desire to minimize the challenges of the current global environmental realities do so by contending that current changes in climate are simply the product of natural ebbs and flows in global temperature. These ebbs and flows run in cycles of decades and centuries. They are comparable to the natural changes in seasons.

This was the conventional scientific wisdom of early 20th century climatology.¹³ There is a partial truth to this perspective. There are indeed natural ebbs and flows in global temperature.

¹¹ "Climate Change: Basic Information," Environmental Protection Agency, last modified March 3, 2014, accessed October 30, 2014, <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/basics/>.

¹² McKibben, *Eaarth*, 9.

¹³ Spencer R. Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1-2.

The problem is not so much that this perspective was wrong, but that it is now clearly truncated. The data has increased. The measurements improved. The perspective widened. The science has become better informed. It has become clear that the older seasonal perspective no longer makes sense of current climate realities. To use the old science of climatology now is tantamount to using a phone manual from the early 1990s to understand how to operate an iPhone. One might be able to figure out how to make a call, but not much more than that.

Continuing to propagate this outdated, partial scientific perspective dangerously obscures the now stark scientific consensus that points to the demonstrably human effects on planetary climate conditions. This is a classic example of ideological discourse operative around climate change. With his typically sharp wit, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that, “the starting point of the critique of ideology has to be the full acknowledgement of the fact that it is easily possible *to lie in the guise of truth*.”¹⁴ He goes on to give the example of when a powerful and affluent Western nation intervenes in the affairs of a smaller impoverished nation on the basis that “the most elementary human rights were not respected.”¹⁵ While this may be true, it is a vulgar decontextualized truth that only serves as an ideological veneer to justify actual motives related to colonial expansion, advancing economic interests, etc. The same often holds true in climatological discourse. A piece of the truth is used to tell a lie.

Global warming and climate change are not reducible to natural phenomena. Instead, they are the direct product of the modes of production and consumption that sustain human life on our planet today. Global climate change is unintelligible as an analytical category divorced from its human aspect. Thus, it must be understood in its climatologically descriptive sense as well as its sociologically material sense. This human component has led Nobel Laureate chemist Paul

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994), 8.

¹⁵ Žižek, *Mapping Ideology*, 8.

Crutzen to dub the era beginning in the early 18th century with the Industrial Revolution the *Anthropocene* epoch – literally meaning the “New Human” era.¹⁶ This term highlights a historic shift “in which humanity has become the main driver of rapid changes in the earth system.”¹⁷ The realization is that “humans could fundamentally alter the planet.”¹⁸

The scientific climatological narrative has been well articulated. The machine of modern modes of production is fueled by the burning of massive amounts of fossil fuels, primarily oil and coal, which in turn produce enormous amounts of both goods and greenhouse gases. Carbon dioxide is flooding into the atmosphere creating a blanket that traps energy causing rising temperatures across the globe. As the temperature increases, new conditions are created for other natural phenomena to occur that further increase the rate of temperature rise, such as the release of large amounts of methane gas, another greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere. This cycle has seen atmospheric carbon levels reach nearly 400 parts per million (ppm) currently. This is 125 ppm higher than the mostly stable average of 275 ppm during the past 100,000 years of Earth’s history. Furthermore, this is 50 ppm above the 350 number identified as safe by leading climatologist Jim Hansen.¹⁹

The effects of climate change are ecologically deep and wide. This is a perverse twist on the old children’s church song that talks about the fountain flowing deep and wide. The striking realization is that these effects are happening now. The common assumption from early climate change science, up until just a few years ago, was that the effects would be borne by future generations. While the next generations will certainly bear the brunt of current environmental

¹⁶ John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 13.

¹⁷ Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 14.

¹⁸ McKibben, *Eaarth*, 10.

¹⁹ “Science & Impacts Fact Sheet,” 350.org, accessed October 30, 2014, http://350.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ClimateScience_350_2014.pdf.

degradation, this perspective no longer holds sway. The evidence is pointing to vast environmental disruption in the here and now. McKibben summarizes the situation well when he writes, "...global warming is no longer a philosophical threat, no longer a future threat, no longer a threat at all. It's our reality."²⁰ In theological terms, it's a type of terrifying realized ecological eschatology unfolding before our eyes.

Just a few examples will suffice to make the picture clear. Rising temperatures in California lakes and rivers have 82% of California's native freshwater fish facing the likelihood of extinction over the next century.²¹ A recent study by Stanford scientist Noah Diffenbaugh has linked the most recent California drought, which has included the driest year in the state's recorded history, with high atmospheric pressure systems hovering over the Pacific Ocean associated with high concentrations of greenhouse gases.²² The rate of global sea level rise, which had remained at zero over the past 2,000 years, has seen an increase of .06 inches per year throughout the 20th century with this number having increased to .12 beginning in the early 1990s and continuing to present day.²³ The list could go on and on, but the point is clear: climate change *is* changing and *has already* changed our planet in fundamental ways.

With such a clear scientific picture, why is it that attempts to obscure this reality remain pervasive? Addressing this question means attuning to the sociological element of the concept of climate change. It means probing human agency in the totality of the earth's grand ecosystem. Denying the accepted scientific narrative attempts to ground its claim in a pseudo-naturalist

²⁰ McKibben, *Eaarth*, xiii.

²¹ "Climate change threatens extinction for 82 percent of California native fish," University of California – Davis, ScienceDaily, accessed October 30, 2014, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/05/130530170044.htm>.

²² Ker Than, "Causes of California drought linked to climate change, Stanford scientists say," Stanford Report, September 30, 2014, accessed October 30, 2014, <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/september/drought-climate-change-092914.html>.

²³ "Climate Change Indicators in the United States," Environmental Protection Agency, last modified July 2, 2014, accessed on October 30, 2014, <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/science/indicators/oceans/sea-level.html>.

narrative. This strategy of denial purports to separate the human from everything else on earth. This is a two worlds view. There is the human world independent and separate from everything else in the universe. Then, there is the natural world that includes everything else other than humans. The two are pictured as more or less operating entirely separately in two discrete spheres, each carrying on naturally. The natural becomes tantamount to the historically inevitable, hence, the term pseudo-naturalistic. This paradigm categorically rejects the possibility of significant human involvement in the natural world. Taken a step further, implicit in this two worlds perspective is an assumed hierarchy. The human world stands over and above the natural world below. This amounts to a simple reiteration of the modern logic produced by Western moral philosophy. It is often termed an anthropocentric environmental ethic. Richard Sylvan articulates the end of this logic succinctly when he writes: "...on the prevailing view man is free to deal with nature [i.e. the earth] as he pleases."²⁴ He goes on to say: "The dominant Western view is simply inconsistent with an environmental ethic."²⁵ Thus, insofar as the dominant Western ideology remains intact a move toward biocentric ecological thought and praxis will remain elusive.

Lastly, and most importantly, the dissonance between the scientific climatological narrative of a profoundly altered and threatened world, including both the human and the non-human, and the preservation of an ideological tradition that works to downplay and dismiss current environmental world realities must be considered. This is the overtly sociological emphasis – dealing with collective humanity and societal relationships, internal and external, as well as existential and material.

²⁴ Richard Sylvan, "Is There A Need For A New, An Environmental, Ethic," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 4th edition, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman et al. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 16.

²⁵ Sylvan, *Environmental Philosophy*, 17.

The writing is on the wall in big bold italicized letters like at King Belshazzar's feast in the old Hebrew story. A planetary ecological holocaust is impending.²⁶ Yet, collective humanity not only ignores this fact, but also actively works to obscure it. How can we make sense of this suicidal tendency? What animates this anti-world-and-life-view? It cannot simply be a matter of better, truer ideas replacing older, less true ideas, because the more ecologically productive ideas continue to lurk on the margins of societal influence despite grounding in a robust scientific discourse.

Ideas do not lead to action. Instead, praxis determines theory. Theory does not shape the world. The world in all of its actual physical relationships shapes theory. Theory tends to simply reinforces that which *is*. It does not create that which is Real, but instead is a product of the Real. The Real is being understood here as the existing organization of material reality as it is. There is nothing outside the embodied. No world soul carrying things along. Ideas are an expression of specific formations of embodiment. This represents a rejection of an idealist ontology that undergirds much of Western philosophy. Yet, a dialectic must be maintained between the ideal and the material in order to avoid a nihilistic determinism. The corrective is toward more weight being given to the material. Thus, the point to be made is that theoretical critique while having some value, ultimately, remains superficial outside of a consideration of material relations. The point germane to the church being that more books and bible studies about environmental theology are not the antidote for the moment but emergent communities of praxis and material patterns of biocentric ecological being explored collectively. The old pedagogical adage works here, don't tell me the way, show it to me. In other words, if you want an ecotheology, start by

²⁶ Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 423-424.

planting a garden. Then, read the book. This was the point of the immersive youth ecojustice retreat that anchors this project. More on this in Chapter 5.

A material critique is necessary. It is helpful on two accounts. First, it brings back together nature and humanity insofar as both are material. This bringing together of the physical and the social within a unified spectrum is a central insight pursued by the ecofeminist project.²⁷ The dualism of the two worlds narrative is overcome. This allows for new explorations into holistic narratives and practices. Marxist philosopher David Harvey contends that dialectical thinking “prioritizes the understanding of processes, flows, fluxes and relations over the analysis of elements, things, structures and organized systems.”²⁸ The accent is not on the substances but on the space between that binds, relates, and constructs. The echoes of ecological thinking can be heard resonating here, especially against the definition of ecology ventured by Paul Taylor: A biocentric, or ecological, outlook “is to see the whole natural order of the Earth’s biosphere as a complex but unified web of interconnected organisms, objects, and events.”²⁹ Furthermore, as ecofeminism teaches, this ecological thinking beyond dualisms allows for deep analysis of power relations that includes both the environmental and the social, which have previously been rent apart by the tradition of patriarchal Western philosophy. This makes space for the second and more specific aspect of a material analysis.

Material analysis provides a foundation for critiquing the dominant ideology of global capitalism. The professed central value espoused by this discourse is individual human freedom.

²⁷ Karen J. Warren, “Ecofeminism and Environmental Ethics: Introduction,” in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 4th edition, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman et al. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 140.

²⁸ John Clark, “Political Ecology: Introduction,” in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 4th edition, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman et al. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 375.

²⁹ Paul W. Taylor, “The Ethics of Respect for Nature,” in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 4th edition, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman et al. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 72.

Each individual should be free to pursue his or her own interests insofar as it does not impinge upon the freedom of another to do the same. A system of rights is then layered on top of the base of freedom as the mechanism that manages and negotiates the freedoms of competing individuals. Framed in economic parlance, individuals become free to pursue unrestricted economic growth. Free markets become the mechanism for managing this pursuit. Hence, freedom is quite seamlessly translated into unrestricted economic growth. It is this value system that drives our modern world and determines our relationship with all that is *other*. Political systems are built in order to defend and protect this logic. Endless production and consumption become the primary activities of life. All this must be pursued without limit because to suggest limits is to curtail freedom, which is an unpardonable sin in the theopolitical imagination of late capitalism.

The earth is nothing more than a consumable stage for hosting this global capitalist drama. Human bodies are reduced to productive possibilities and consumptive values. All are units in a calculus that arranges the pieces of reality into a system of tremendous inequality. The purported value of freedom functions as a discursive tool for reinscription of the status quo. Ideology par excellence here. The means for life are siphoned to an economic elite class and away from other humans, other species, and the entire biosphere. The situation is one of a radical desertification flowing across the entire fabric of reality. The symbolic and physical, the social and the material, merge in this image. The challenge is to rearrange not simply the ideological edifice of modernity, but to restructure at the very root material relationships of the entire global ecosystem. It is a move beyond just “a radical revision of the *moral* universe” suggested by process theologian Philip Clayton to a radical revision of the *material* universe.³⁰ Ecofeminism,

³⁰ Philip Clayton, Lecture on Ecofeminism at Claremont School of Theology, October 29, 2014.

and other liberative discourses and alternative politics, are especially attuned to this project offering a variety of textured analysis that articulate the plethora of material and discursive elements at play. It is important that material communities of praxis are drinking from this well of ecowisdom.

Second Movement: Toward a Constructive Ecological Theory for Communities of Praxis

The situation is dire. The challenges ahead immense. New ways of thinking, speaking, acting, living, even being, are all desperately needed. New economics, new politics, even new civilizations, must emerge. The alternative, which is the status quo, is simply no longer a viable option. The way forward must be dialectical in the sense of holding together the big and the small. Nothing can fall through the cracks, yet cracks are all we must have. The fragmentary whole of poetry replaces the uniform control of prose. The mosaic becomes the organizing motif with fractured shards held together in beautiful and ever-renegotiated unity.

Philosopher Zachary Simpson frames the situation philosophically in terms of life after the collapse of “a transcendent source of meaning which grounds the events and spaces of the everyday.”³¹ The challenge is to ensure the continued collapse of the old way while at the same time picking up the pieces and moving forward in a meaningful way, recognizing “it is only temporary or even provisional.”³² This way forward is through the creative artistic impulse. Simpson calls this life as art. This is in contrast to the technological management impulse. Theologian Sam Keen describes this as an anthropological shift from *homo faber*, man-as-maker, to *homo viator*, human-as-pilgrim or human-as-dancer.³³ Humanity gracefully moves in step in

³¹ Simpson, *Life as Art: Aesthetics and the Creation of the Self* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 76.

³² Simpson, *Life as Art*, Location 90.

³³ Sam Keen, “Manifesto for a Dionysian Theology,” *Cross Currents*, 19 no. 1 (Winter 1969): 37-54.

the grand dance of ecological existence. In this vein, this section will explore four suggestions for ecological existence that might rearrange the pieces toward an ecologically holistic present that functions to promote and sustain life and which can be guides for churches and communities of ecological praxis.

Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann contends: “Everybody has a script. People live their lives by a script that is sometimes explicit but often implicit.”³⁴ This should be slightly nuanced to read scripts. There are various narrative worlds that we inhabit that both expand and limit our ways of being. These narratives are both known and unknown. They are layered and complex. The examination in the previous section began to explore some of the contours of the dominant scripts surrounding nature, humanity, and the relationship between the two. It worked at the task of deconstruction. But, deconstruction without reconstruction, partial as it may be, is nihilism – ecological meaninglessness.

Moving toward ecological existence entails producing new and renewed scripts. These scripts must tell stories of wholeness and connection. This opens new vistas for practical inhabitation for the human actors in the unfolding drama. Jungian analyst Jules Cashford frames this script-writing endeavor as “the creation of a new mythology.”³⁵ For Cashford, this means a recovery of the Gaia narrative, which is “a vision of the universe as one dynamic soul.”³⁶ For scientists and engaged Buddhists John Stanley and David Loy, this means the creation of a new story that combines science and the best of non-dualistic traditions.³⁷ For author and scholar Mary Evelyn Tucker and mathematical cosmologist Brian Thomas Swimme, this means telling

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Counterscript,” *The Christian Century*, November 29, 2005, 22-28.

³⁵ Jules Cashford, “Gaia & the Anima Mundi,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, ed. Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee (Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 181.

³⁶ Cashford, “Gaia & the Anima Mundi,” 179.

³⁷ John Stanley and David Loy, “At the Edge of the Roof: The Evolutionary Crisis of the Human Spirit,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth* ed. Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee (Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 45.

the integrated story of the Journey of the Universe, which weaves together the stories of the universe, the earth, and humanity into one holistic narrative of connection.³⁸ For farmer and Christian theologian of place, Wendell Berry, this scripting means taking literally the words from the Gospel of John that “God loves the world.”³⁹ These four examples are just a small sampling from a deep well of ecological scripts. Each tells a different story, some mutually exclusive, yet all are animated by a desire to re-narrate the relationship between humans and the rest of the material universe in a way that promotes wholeness, connection, and healing across the biosphere. Ecological re-scripting is the first suggestion for the support of ecological existence in community.

The second suggestion for fostering ecological existence is the struggle of ecological revolution. An immediate and radical break with the logics and mechanisms of global capitalism is necessary. John Bellamy Foster asserts this necessity on account of the fact that a total ecological collapse is a very real possibility within a generation or two following the current trajectory.⁴⁰ The time window for change allows for nothing short of revolutionary transformation. This means a deliberate political deconstruction of the modes of production and consumption of global capitalism.

Precluded by this suggestion are the green technological fixes that leave the malignant ideological edifice of growth, hierarchy, profits, and accumulation untouched. The issue is not greener growth, which is in fact only less-brown growth.⁴¹ Ecological revolution means the end

³⁸ Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Thomas Swimme, “The Next Transition: The Evolution of Humanity’s Role in the Universe,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, ed. Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee (Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 56-57.

³⁹ Wendell Berry, “Contributions,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, ed. Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee (Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 77.

⁴⁰ Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 426.

⁴¹ Brian Czech, *Supply Shock: Economic Growth at the Crossroads and the Steady State Solution* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2013), 196-197.

of the entire growth paradigm. The discourse must be shifted to distribution, equity, and life. It is a revolution of enough rooted in the theological soils of Genesis, Sabbath, and grace. It is the work of creating a “just and sustainable society.”⁴² Chef and educator José Andrés reflecting on the notion of sustainability captures the important connection between the social and the ecological for this revolution when he writes: “But the true meaning of sustainability is helping everyone in our community to become a rightful member, contributing to our society and our future.”⁴³ Ecological revolution rearranges both social and environmental relations in biotically generative, meaning life-giving, ways.

It is difficult to formulate specific policies that would be ecological in the context of a deeply compromised system. Despite this difficulty, policy construction must be attempted lest the status quo roll on perpetually underneath a superstructure of revolutionary discourse. The issue is not one of specific details, but of types. What types of policies produce substantive changes? The third suggestion for promoting ecological existence is the development of types of policies that transform the dominant economic and political structures, both locally and globally.

One example of this type of policy alteration is the sweeping alternative economic model offered by ecologist Brian Czech, which he terms steady state economics. Czech’s model is built around the necessity for a “steady state revolution.”⁴⁴ The steady state solution argues for a structural shift away from a model of economic growth to one of equilibrium. The bounds of what counts as policies promoting equilibrium are set by that which maintains and restores “ecological integrity and environmental health.”⁴⁵ The first Steady State Conference held in 2010

⁴² Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 436.

⁴³ José Andrés, “Food: The Ultimate Answer,” in *Practicing Sustainability*, ed. Guruprasad Madhavan (New York: Springer, 2013), 8.

⁴⁴ Czech, *Supply Shock*, 260-261.

⁴⁵ Czech, *Supply Shock*, 290.

at Leeds University identified six types of policies needed for the implementation of a steady state economy: (1) limiting resource use and waste production, (2) stabilizing population, (3) insuring equitable distribution of income and wealth, (4) reforming the monetary system, (5) securing employment, and (6) changing measures of progress.⁴⁶ These categories provide a trajectory for a wide range of ecological policies.

Another compelling example is the model of ecological taxation and social redistribution outlined by James Hansen. Massive economic incentives promote the search for, the production of, and the use of fossil fuels, those primary drivers of global warming. The script must be flipped in a drastic manner in order to disincentivize production and consumption of fossil fuels. To do this, Hansen proposes two environmental taxes in order to help flip the script.⁴⁷ First is a fossil fuel tax at the point of production in order to help curb consumption through rising costs. Second is a carbon tax based on consumption. The gains from these taxes would then be democratically and directly redistributed to those with smaller carbon footprints meaning those with less consumption i.e. the poor. The ecological and social come together along the lines of this proposal.

The final suggestion is a politics of place[ment]. Foster notes that Marx understood the proletariat to be the revolutionary agent in history precisely because of particular material place[ment].⁴⁸ By being placed at the site of the “inhuman conditions in contemporary society” the proletariat was in a location where there was nothing to be lost in the struggle to overthrow an oppressive system because there was already nothing at that place. With backs up against the wall, the only way left is forward. Revolutionary action is the only viable alternative. Hence, ears

⁴⁶ Czech, *Supply Shock*, 290.

⁴⁷ Foster, Clark and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 437.

⁴⁸ Foster, Clark and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 439.

must be attuned to the places of nothingness, the margins of our modern world, the places of deepest social and ecological devastation; here is where the engaged Bhuddist Tich Nhat Hanh says, “the bells of mindfulness” will be resounding most clearly.⁴⁹ This is the place where wisdom for transformative ways forward principally resides. A politics of place[ment] finds its home in ecologically marginal places. Place[ment] at the margins also functions to prevent this form of body politics from devolving into lifestyle politics that are self-indulgent and escapist expressions of privilege.

Lastly, a politics of place[ment] works from the hyper-local outward and not vice-versa. This runs counter to a common tendency in ecology to constantly place individuals within larger and larger networks. While the profound complexity of the webs and layers of relations that form the one great fabric of existence in which all persons are woven together with all other things may indeed be the ontological structure of reality, it remains existentially and functionally meaningless for individual persons. While one may be able to understand the grand ecological narrative cognitively, it is beyond one’s ability to relate to this ontological whole in any politically substantive ways. The human capacity for empathy that drives action is very limited. Imagination as political tool can only stretch so far. It is difficult to relate ecologically to a human neighbor right next door. How can one possibly have the capacity to relate ecologically to another species in a completely different and remote location of the great biotic community of the earth? This is too great a task. Place[ment] in the grand earth ecosystem must come through local place[ment] and engagement.

What can be understood is the soil under one’s feet, the tree under which one finds shade, the beach where one’s family goes for play, etc. A politics of place[ment] involves a re-

⁴⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Bells of Mindfulness,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, ed. Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee (Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 25.

grounding of communities within local ecosystems. This is much more existentially and politically manageable. It lies within the human empathetic capacity. We can imagine the local ecologically in very concrete and specific ways, which we cannot do when attempting to imagine the entire earth in its totality of ecological relations.

Third Movement: Toward New Communities

The flow of this chapter has been from an exploration of the current situation of climate change, understood both in terms of science and sociology, toward a set of suggestions for promoting ecological existence in the face of this situation. To conclude, this final section will introduce two movements working toward developing communities that foster ecological existence.

These attempts to grow ecological communities constitute artistic endeavors insofar as they are constructive projects working to make a new way out of an old wasteland. This is in contrast to the technological endeavors of green development that attempt to simply manage life within the ideological and material systems of the status quo. In ecological community, the artistic and revolutionary impulses overlap in rejecting current reality in favor of an alternative world. They are local eschatological experiments. In the biblical tradition, they might be called first fruits or *ecclesia*.

Most importantly, these communities are examples of *prefiguring* – the practice of setting up alternative social structures not determined by the dominant social order, yet still within its confines, only because no other space yet exists.⁵⁰ They are the avant-garde of a new ecological civilization, or to borrow a metaphor from Gaia Education, they are the *seeds* of a way of being

⁵⁰ Karen Litfin, “Reinventing the Future,” in *Environmental Governance: Power and Knowledge in a Local-Global World*, eds. Gabriela Kutting and Ronnie Lipschutz (London: Routledge, 2009), 141.

growing, not from the top-down, but from the bottom-up. Political scientist Karen Litfin sees this as vital in light of the fact that the current unsustainable social order by its very nature of being unsustainable will collapse at some point in the future.⁵¹ Ecological communities will be crucial insofar as they can be guides for others along the descent into life on the new and radically altered world of the future wrought by climate change.

The first movement is the global Ecovillage movement. Drawing on the work of Litfin, who has studied this movement extensively, the movement is best understood as a transnational network of communities working in diverse local contexts across the globe to explore life in community, both social and biotic, rooted in a holistic ontology that relates all things organically in a context of radical interdependence.⁵² These communities are extremely diverse in size, location, demographics, yet they all center on the development of “virtuous cycles...which regenerate the land, enliven the community, and sustain its members in cohesive wholes consisting of integrated human and natural systems.”⁵³ Examples of specific practices include permaculture farming, minimizing waste through recycling and composting, shared community resources, interactive education programs, building from local resources, using solar and wind power, etc. The list could go on and on. In very practical terms, ecovillages are seeking and achieving a low-impact way of life in a socially supportive environment.⁵⁴

The second movement is the Watershed Discipleship movement. This is a grassroots distinctively Christian movement that seeks to invite communities of faith to “‘re-inhabit’ that corner of creation in which we reside by apprehending and engaging everything within it in

⁵¹ Litfin, “Reinventing the Future,” 141.

⁵² Karen Litfin, “A Whole New Way of Life: Ecovillages and the Revitalization of Deep Community,” in *The Localization Reader: Adapting to the Coming Downshift*, eds. Ramon De Young and Thomas Princen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 130.

⁵³ Litfin, “A Whole New Way of Life,” 130.

⁵⁴ Litfin, “Reinventing the Future,” 125.

terms of ecological resiliency and social justice.”⁵⁵ It is a practice of contextual environmental theology. It is also a very specific practice of a politics of place[ment], or re-placement, to use the language of the movement. The beginning point for the theory and praxis that guides the community is the particular watershed inhabited by the community. As such, the watershed both focuses and limits community life.

Ecoliteracy is central for watershed discipleship because it the key practice for re-placing those long alienated from their bioregion. This is rooted in the wisdom of Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum who says: “We won’t save places we don’t love; we can’t love places we don’t know; and we don’t know places we haven’t learned.”⁵⁶ Learning, reconnecting with, and loving the land is promoted through popular and practical education. Watershed ecoliteracy quickly blends into and includes social justice education insofar as an exploration of the history of any land here in the United States must include the stories and wisdom of those peoples indigenous to the land. The ultimate aim of watershed discipleship is for churches “to become centers for learning to love our places enough to defend and restore them.”⁵⁷ This amounts to an embodied practice of a social and ecological politics of resurrection.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the current ecological moment as both climatological narrative and sociological construction. It argued for the extremity of the current moment as our world teeters on the edge of ecological disaster. This was seen to be a material problem inviting a material response that is embodied in communities of ecological existence. As a pastor and curator of

⁵⁵ Ched Myers, “A Watershed Moment,” *The Christian Century*, May, 2014, 23.

⁵⁶ Myers, “A Watershed Moment,” 23.

⁵⁷ Myers, “A Watershed Moment,” 24.

Christian community, I am deeply invested in the work of the church becoming part of the avant-garde of a new ecological existence. This is to translate the Pauline notion of putting off the old self and clothing oneself with Christ in a distinctive ecological key. The anthropocentric and ecologically destructive old self is taken off and a Teilhardian cosmic Christ is put on that connects us to the theopolitical reality that “one single thing is being made in creation: the body of Christ.”⁵⁸ Key to this process in the life of the church is a returning to our sacred stories and traditions in order to see what might be found and repurposed as type of theological compost for fertilizing an ecotheological imagination that centers our communities of faith. The center point for Christian reflection on the environment and our relationship with and within it comes from the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. This is the root from which our theology of creation grows. It is these origins to which we must now attend for the growth of a new ecochurch.

⁵⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution: Reflections on Science and Religion*, trans. Rene Hague (San Diego: Harcourt Inc, 1971), 74.

CHAPTER 2

Creatio Ex Deo: A Deep Theological Ecology

Introduction

Creation seems an obvious thing. It is what is there. It is what we experience. It is where we are. It is above and below as sky and earth. It is dirt. It is universe. It is particles. It is waves. It is everything. It is nothing. It is the context for life. It is the negation of life. It is dialectic. It is paradox. It is movement. It is rest. It is us. It is beyond us. It is God. It is not God.

What seems initially so obvious, at first thought, quickly becomes obscure upon further reflection. It fades into the complexities of analysis buried beneath layers and excretions of language and theory. What initially is so close is expelled to profound distance. The task of theology is to inhabit this tension, this strain. It is to make meaning in the midst of our inexhaustible alienation and difference next to our irreducible presence and existence. It is to wrestle with infinite otherness and here-ness at the center of human existence. Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff puts it this way: “Doing theology always means asking what connection there is between this situation and God.”⁵⁹ It is about the human-divine relationship.

To speak of creation is to speak theologically. To speak at all is to speak theologically. Language forges and creates connection. It orders, disorders, and reorders in perpetual motion. It relates. It draws together. It separates. It is the event of, as well as the dissolution of, the whole. It is affirmation and negation of all things. It is stream and event. It is. Here, on the edge of being, is divinity. Speech borders God and God borders speech. A strange singularity of dissimilarity between the actual and the possible, between the human and the god, emerges. This is the realm of the theological, the space toward which this chapter leans into as it searches for a

⁵⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 43.

new grounding for our theology of creation that might foster faith communities of ecological existence – ecochurches.

The primary focus of this chapter is theological ecology. Put another way, it centers on the articulation of an understanding of divine-world relationality. It is an exploration of the organic relationship between God and world, world and God. This exploration traverses two ancient creation myths – the *Enuma Elish* from Babylon and the biblical Priestly creation account of Genesis 1 from the Hebrew theological imagination. Catherine Keller and her *tehomic* theology form the primary muse for this exploration providing language, structure, and cues for developing the notion of a deep theological ecology for ecochurches. A deep theological ecology represents a panentheistic venture into understanding the creator-creature relationship. This places God in the world and the world in God in a mutual relationship of love. This runs counter to traditional Western theological formations rooted in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The problematic nature of creation out of nothing will be interrogated. The contention throughout will be that a deep theological ecology understands the world as being created out of God, *creatio ex Deo*. The divine milieu of endless love expressed in ever deepening differentiated unity forms the ecosystem into which the drama of human existence and praxis unfolds.

Surveying Ecotheology

Before venturing into the constructive articulation of this project's theological ecology it will be insightful to traverse the landscape of ecotheology. This survey begins with the ecological theology of Sallie McFague which offers the model of God as body to open up new theological vistas. It then moves into the practical and liberative movements of Ivone Gebara who connects God, humanity, and creation in a web of relatedness. It then turns to Timothy

Murphy who presses toward ecclesiological reformulation as he reconceives the four traditional marks of the church – one, holy, universal, apostolic – in dipolar relationality. The postmodern processual political ecotheology built around intersectional agonism of Catherine Keller is considered. Melanie L. Harris’ ecowomanism with its historically conscious methodology brings the survey to a close. The most significant thread for an ecoecclesiology for ecochurches emerging from the field of ecotheology is the insistence on a movement away from the static and the ontological for understanding church and a transition toward the fluid and the rhizomatic.

Sallie McFague: The Body of God

Sallie McFague’s *The Body of God* provides a *locus classicus* for early postmodern ecotheology. With theological rigor and conceptual focus, she rethinks many traditional theological categories such as God, Christology, and eschatology through the lens of body. She asks, “What if we dared to think of our planet and indeed the entire universe as the body of God?”⁶⁰ This is an opening up of incarnation. It expands beyond Jesus to include all bodies from the human to the microscopic to the celestial. Given this new frame, salvation becomes thoroughly ecological as it comes to be understood as being that event through which “the health and well-being of the body of the world and the many bodies that constitute that larger organism” unfolds.⁶¹ The model of body is embedded with a logic that powerfully holds together the ecological and the social. All bodies – human and non-human – are enfolded into God, who is body. This is why McFague can say:

“At one level our model - the universe as God’s body - moves us in the direction of contemplating the glory and grandeur of divine creation, an aesthetic awe at unending galactic wonders, while at another level it moves us in the direction of compassionate

⁶⁰ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 19.

⁶¹ McFague, *The Body of God*, 23.

identification with and service to the fragile, suffering, oppressed bodies that surround us.”⁶²

The model of body necessitates a shift in thinking from world as machine to world as organism, or from atomism to holism. This is a shift that all ecotheology takes up in one way or another. The world as machine leads to a theological vision of God as “the ultimate Fixer.” From this perspective, God is conceptualized as “a personal, eternal superperson who intervenes in the lives of particular individuals at times of stress and despair to fix problems.”⁶³ Walter Brueggemann has called this theology, which is operative in the lives of many Christians today, “therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism.”⁶⁴ This is problematic insofar as it makes God aloof and arbitrary. God is out there and might, or might not, be present with us. It makes the human / God relationship transactional instead of inherent and grace/ful. It is a place of uncertainty and anxiety. In contrast, when the world is understood as an interrelated and interconnected organism, then God becomes the Spirit flowing through the organism. God is no longer out there, but as close as each breath that animates life. McFague says that everything in creation lives “moment by moment, by the breath of God.”⁶⁵ This means that everything belongs. It means we belong. The God / human relationship is woven ontologically into our anthropological constitution. The sacramentality of all bodies points to this reality.

The implications of this new theological script moves Christian ecopraxis from a paternalistic stewardship ethos to a posture of enmeshed solidarity.⁶⁶ Alongside, instead of over or above, is the preposition for an ecotheology. It is alongside the whole community of creation

⁶² McFague, *The Body of God*, 135.

⁶³ McFague, *The Body of God*, 34.

⁶⁴ Brueggemann, “Counterscript,” 22-28.

⁶⁵ McFague, *The Body of God*, 144.

⁶⁶ McFague, *The Body of God*, 197.

that we are literally living and moving and having our being in God.⁶⁷ It is from within this community that McFague sees the church as event and sign. She says:

“Where human beings, decentered as the goal of creation and recentered as those who side with the oppressed, create communities embodying concern for the basic needs of the life-forms on earth, aware of their profound interdependence as well as individuality, here is the church.”⁶⁸

Through this shared praxis the church becomes a sign pointing to the new creation, which is tantamount to a world of deep ecological existence. This is a compelling vision that can help lure the church into re/existence, but this event might only ever be found in the lives of ecosaints and articulated in the pages of ecotheology. The ecoecclesiology of McFague gets stuck in the realms of the aspirational and eschatological. It is more hopeful utterance than practical and pastoral theology. We need an ecoecclesiology for the ordinary. Ecochurch for the rest of us might be something like trying to consume a little less or moving from disposable coffee cups to reusable ones at coffee hour or reading a book beyond our comfort zone about global poverty. These small seeds might one day become great trees or at least the soil for trees still to come.

Ivone Gebara: Longing for Running Water

Ivone Gebara theologizes from her location among the urban poor in São Paulo, Brazil. In the Prologue of her book, *Longing for Running Water*, she says, “I remain an urban woman, but I now have a different perception of things – a bodily perception of the unity and interdependence of all living things.”⁶⁹ This recognition of the tension between her urban place[ment] and the movement toward an ecological existence is where many people of faith find

⁶⁷ This is a rearticulation from Paul’s sermon in Athens in Acts 17:28, which is a key biblical text for ecotheology and its biblical hermeneutics.

⁶⁸ McFague, *The Body of God*, 206.

⁶⁹ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), vi.

themselves today. We wonder what it means to be ecological when we are surrounded by anti-ecological urban jungle. Do we have to set out for the wilderness or might the ecospirit blow through these dense hot places as well? So when Gebara writes, “I am creating an urban ecofeminism, one that has little to do with the world of forests, with the mysteries of the jungle, with the power of rivers and waterfalls, and with the eruption of volcanos,” we find something that resonates deeply.⁷⁰ This is the search of so many churches today looking to foster ecological existence right where they are placed.

The vision of God that Gebara builds is a type of ecological leaning into the Feuerbachian analysis of theology as projection. Through her ecofeminist lens what is projected is not the individual male in search of power, but the human enmeshed in endless rhizomatic ecological relationships. The multiplicity of the whole constitutes the singularity of the part. She says, “We are, fundamentally, relatedness.”⁷¹ This is a potent starting point for an ecotheology that works from the bottom up and this is one of the important shifts within ecotheology more generally. Ecotheology does not ask reality and persons to conform to some disembodied theological ideal imposed from above. Instead, it emerges from below in the midst of the experiences, struggles, questions, and loves of persons in community. It is from here that Gebara says, “God is relatedness.”⁷² After saying this, she leans into the apophatic impulse refusing to impose a top down definition. There is no hidden structure, only indeterminacy and theopoetics. She says, “Relatedness is utterance, word, attraction, flux, energy, and passion, insofar as it is the materiality and spirituality of all that is.”⁷³ This is an indeterminate and creative panentheism.

⁷⁰ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, vii.

⁷¹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 84.

⁷² Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 103.

⁷³ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 103.

Reconceptualizing God as relatedness moves the linguistic-metaphoric landscape of ecotheology away from the hierarchical emphases of distinction, separation, and degree fostered by a traditional patriarchal theology to the emphases of connection, struggle, and mutuality. This is a subversive shift that destabilizes the ideological foundations of dominant political theologies that are used to define, order, and exploit the other in relationships of imbalance and domination. Here are planted the linguistic seeds of a theology understood ecologically that can become a transformative force of sustainability and resiliency. Ecotheology does not simply offer new sentences built on the old language; it gives entirely new words for speaking again the world into existence beyond the divisions and reductions of patriarchy and capitalism. The creation is ongoing. In ecochurch this happens through new language and liturgy. Dead dirt becomes sacred soil. Clean water from the tap becomes *agua es vida*. It is an ecological re/enchantment of the world that follows from theology discovering ecology.

Gebara deepens her ecotheological vision with a radical reconstruction of the Trinity. She says she, “would like to detheologize the issue of the Trinity as much as possible.”⁷⁴ Her concern is that theology [re]moved trinitarian discourse from its original place[ment] in the lived experiences of the early Christians. It became primarily an academic concern of correlating early Christian theology with dominant Greek philosophy as opposed to the work of connecting early Christian experience with an ever growing and evolving spirituality. Detheologizing is about finding renewed meaning for old theological concepts. It is a type of theological recycling embracing an ecological hermeneutics of recovery. Gebara connects the trinitarian number of “three” with our experience of “the awesome multiplicity of things – of their plurality, the great differences among them, their bewildering transformations, their fragility and transience, and the

⁷⁴ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 139.

blend of life and death, death and life.”⁷⁵ This reality of multiplicity is often experienced as pain, difficulty, and trauma. We feel torn and broken by the world. Surrounded by this raging sea of multiplicity, we also recognize within us a desire for the singular, to be pulled together, for communion, to be made whole. Life unfolds within this tension. This all leads Gebara to a compelling trinitarian vision of hope:

“It is as if that Holy Trinity of which we speak were the expression of a transformed and harmonized plural world, one in which all suffering and pain are overcome, in which separation and division are subdued, in which every tear shall be wiped away; and in the end God, that is, the One, Love, is all in all.”⁷⁶

Timothy Murphy: Counter Imperial Churching for a Planetary Gospel

Bringing a decidedly ecclesiological lens to the work of ecotheology, theologian and pastor Timothy Murphy works to shift thinking about the church beyond a static foundationalist definition toward his idea of churching as a participatory and dynamic event that is Christologically shaped by the human Jesus. Church happens. Instead of God without being, it is church without being. Murphy says, “Churching involves a persistent pattern of subversion and alternative making.”⁷⁷ The subversion comes up against Empire and its imperial systems set toward destruction and dehumanization. These show up on the global scene as things like, racism, sexism, classism, and ecological destruction. Murphy sees a politics of neoliberal globalization and an economics of laissez faire capitalism at the root of modern imperial ideology and praxis. Using the New Testament categories of kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia

⁷⁵ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 147.

⁷⁶ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 148.

⁷⁷ Timothy Murphy, *Counter-Imperial Churching for a Planetary Gospel: Radical Discipleship for Today* (Anoka: Process Century Press, 2017), 23.

Murphy seeks to construct an alternative vision for Christian community “that is infused by a passion to maximize the possibilities of the planet’s polycentric actualizations.”⁷⁸

Murphy develops his kerygma, what he calls a “planetary gospel,” in a process theology frame where “the Divine is immanent within all planetary becoming.”⁷⁹ This imbues all entities with a certain amount of value, which challenges the notions of externalities and throw-away culture. There is value that must be discerned and tended to in all things. Drawing on Keller, Murphy explores the idea of “differentiated solidarity” as the basis of the *koinonia* that proclaims the planetary gospel of value.⁸⁰ He says that this oxymoronic praxis is “the sense or activity of participating with, standing alongside, and encountering those who are not identical with yourself, all the while recognizing that you are partially constituted by these others.”⁸¹ The ecological shift means that the non-identical moves beyond the human to complex biotic networks of interrelationships. We are not water and yet we are irreducibly constituted by water. Humans are somewhere around sixty percent water. Thus, it is not just that we inhabit a particular watershed, but that same watershed inhabits us. This is both an ontological and ecological statement.

The final piece of Murphy’s alternative vision turns to political theology in search of a ground for the *diakonia*, or the praxis, of the churching fellowship that proclaims a planetary gospel. At the largest level, the praxis is resistance to Empire and planetary liberation for the oppressed. This is praxis as eschatological hope. In smaller and more local terms, Murphy turns to Amartya Sen and a capabilities approach seeing church as that event which “seeks to maximize relevant and desirable capabilities for the wellbeing of itself, others, and the whole

⁷⁸ Murphy, *Counter-Imperial Churching for a Planetary Gospel*, 28.

⁷⁹ Murphy, *Counter-Imperial Churching for a Planetary Gospel*, 38.

⁸⁰ Murphy, *Counter-Imperial Churching for a Planetary Gospel*, 58.

⁸¹ Murphy, *Counter-Imperial Churching for a Planetary Gospel*, 70.

planet.”⁸² Capabilities are concrete and informed decisions that persons can make regarding things like healthcare, education, work, leisure, etc. This is a political iteration of Camus’ notion that instead of trying to bring heaven to earth, perhaps we should spend more time trying to create a little less hell on the planet here and now.

A survey of ecclesiology building to a reformulation of the four marks of the church concludes Murphy’s project. Churching becomes the creative event swirling around the dynamic contrasts of one/many, holy/secular, universal/particular, and apostolic/novel.⁸³ Following Althaus-Reid, Murphy wants to lean into the indecency of right side of these contrasts against the traditional emphasis on the left side. This is why he demurs to use the definite article with the word church. In light of Murphy’s ecclesiology of churching, we might say that ecochurch does not exist. Not because it is not there, but because it happens.

Catherine Keller: Political Theology of the Earth

With her typical verve and poetic enunciation Catherine Keller has framed her ecotheology in the space between a deconstruction of classic Schmittian political theology and an apophatic theology of unknowing. Between these two movements is a plunging into the earth as “the subject matter, the materializing of life, of any politics and of any theology.”⁸⁴ In the face of the Anthropocene, it is the situation to which the church both acts within and from. It is within these movements that a constructive indeterminacy opens up for an earthen ecotheology that she

⁸² Murphy, *Counter-Imperial Churching for a Planetary Gospel*, 104.

⁸³ Murphy, *Counter-Imperial Churching for a Planetary Gospel*, 155.

⁸⁴ Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 72.

says is, “darkly bound together in the promiscuous solidarities of difference.”⁸⁵ There is a rich sense of intersectionality that pervades Keller’s ecotheological vision.

The political problem, as Keller frames it, is: How to move beyond Schmittian antagonistic politics without lapsing into generic liberalism? She astutely diagnoses the tendency of the revolutionary to reinscribe hatred toward the hater / Other in order to achieve a political “we.” Drawing on the work of Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, Keller uses the notion of agonism, or the struggle, which Keller further defines as the “collective assemblage across critical difference,” as the soil for an alternative political ecotheology.⁸⁶ The language of agonistic politics in theological iteration is lament. Keller says, “The sharing of agony does not cover over but exposes a traumatic history. Only so might its participants live again.”⁸⁷

This is important for a lived ecotheology, which is to say an ecoecclesiology, because it is the linguistic mechanism that can move the conversation beyond its tendency toward the nihilistically catastrophic. Ecological discourse has this tendency toward a reserve apocalyptic. In this view, the end is here and there is not much to be done. It’s defeating and enervating. In contrast, the agonistic energizes a web of new possibilities. It also opens up space for diversity. There is corn, but many seeds. This is an important insight for moving beyond an ecclesiology that simply theorizes the church and toward a dirty ecclesiology that embraces the rich soil of the diverse persons, gifts, and passions that God calls together into community.

Keller concludes the development of her ecopolitics by saying, “We are folded into one another, members of one another, as all things become enfolded in a boundless embodiment... In the recapitulative kairos of our moment, we may assemble ourselves anew right in the face of

⁸⁵ Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 19.

⁸⁶ Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 33.

⁸⁷ Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 29.

crisis.”⁸⁸ I take this to be the heart of Keller’s project, a complete reconceptualizing relationality toward what I have termed ecological existence. Keller finds this useful as a tool for opening up space in the academic and discursive spaces in which she traffics. In some ways, her project is postecclesial as attempts to “open a vein of vivid transdisciplinarity in which theology itself may offer politically useful transcoding between the religious and the secular.”⁸⁹ I find it useful as a tool for local communities of faith trying to understand the places, relationalities, and communities that form the context for entering into the drama of God in Christ in ways deeply incarnational. The church is given permission to re/assemble itself in new, creative, and ecological ways attuned to the ecospirit, which blows where it will.

Turning to her specifically theological concerns, Keller’s work presses toward a critique of sovereignty. She says: “The Sovereign Lord who reigns through the Son over His creation has long appeared, at least outside His own unquestioning enclaves, to be failing to come through, to come, to be.”⁹⁰ In the wake of this death of God, Keller refuses to build a new narrative. She is thoroughly postmodern, apophatic, and mystical here. A new narrative keeps the same idol and just drapes it in different clothes. This is the problem for both essentialist ecotheory and kataphatic theology, they reinscribe, not transform. This is interesting for a postmodern ecoecclesiology. Might it be that the death of the church is the birth of the church in its refusal to be church. In no/thing, there is something. This is the contention of Keller’s “hunchback” ecothoology that she grounds in process, weakness, and difference. It is the question that opens to the next question *ad infinitum*, like a Deleuzian rhizome.

⁸⁸ Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 67.

⁸⁹ Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 10.

⁹⁰ Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 107-108.

Melanie L. Harris: Ecowomanism

The starting point for Melanie Harris and her ecowomanism is the work of “uncovering one’s own environmental familial roots and spiritual connections.”⁹¹ As modern people we are displaced and unscripted being deeply alienated from both land and history. I feel this in my bones and see it in all the faces of those with whom I minister. Against modernity’s deterritorializing amnesia, we are in search of a place and a story. Recovering the practice of remembering is crucial for opening us up to the ecospirit and ecofaith. Remembering is the central liturgical act that happens week in and week out at the eucharistic table. The challenge to ecoecclesiology posed by ecowomanism is the work of connecting this ritual incarnationally and pancarnationally to our soil and story.

Harris articulates a spiral methodology that seeks to channel the “prophetic wisdom and the prophetic Spirit” that animate the discourse and praxis of ecowomanism.⁹² Ecowomanism begins with “honoring experience... through the sharing of ecostory, recalling or retelling the narratives of women of African descent, and examining these ecomemories as countermemory.”⁹³ We need to be rescripted in ecological ways. This needs to be ritualized and routinized because we quickly forget as we are bombarded by the alternative anti-ecological scripts so pervasive in our late capitalist culture. In recalling the ancestors' stories, Harris finds an ecomemory bent toward earth justice that is sustained by a creative relationality of mutual enhancement.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 7.

⁹² Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 26-27.

⁹³ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 27.

⁹⁴ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 29.

Ecowomanist methodology recognizes that race-class-gender all are implicated in shaping one's relationship with nature. This means that modes of praxis will look different given social history and reality. This is a reminder that ecoactivism should be polyvalent. It is not one size fits all. It needs to respond to the specific needs of specific communities in specific locations. For ecowomanism, this leads to a critical engagement with African and African American sources for developing an ecological vision. This cuts against the tendency of the environmental movement toward "ecological colonialism" and opens up space for learning from the rich ecospirituality embodied in the lives and stories of black women.⁹⁵ Harris draws inspiration from Alice Walker who says: "Earth is my home – though for centuries white people have tried to convince me I have no right to exist, except in the dirtiest, darkest corners of the globe."⁹⁶ This assertion of Walker is a reminder that the ecological is concerned with the relatedness of all things and this always includes the relatedness of humans to other humans.

Ecowomanism opens into an interreligious movement and interfaith dialogue insofar as it unfolds across the African diaspora, which is diverse and includes a rich plurality of earth-honoring faiths. Building on her ecowomanist methodology, Harris is more interested in the constructive work of recovering and reframing an alternative ecospiritual cosmology derived from African and African American sources than engaging in dialogue around traditional Eurocentric theological constructs. In her brief engagement with this conversation, she critiques the tendencies of the Western theological tradition toward dualistic hierarchy.⁹⁷ This theo/logic begins with a separation and ranking of Creator and creation. From here it moves to a separating and ranking of persons along the lines of things like gender, race, and class. Then it moves to

⁹⁵ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 50.

⁹⁶ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 55.

⁹⁷ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 146.

humans and non-humans. It is a deeply fractured world picture that emerges from this theo/logic marked out by tensions, hierarchies, and competitions.

In contrast to this picture, ecowomanist cosmology sees “the realms of nature (the earth), humanity, divinity, and the spirit...[as] interconnected.”⁹⁸ Harris agrees with Peter Paris who says that these realms are “ontologically united and hence interdependent.”⁹⁹ Reading this from my location as one schooled and conversant in traditional Euro-oriented theological discourse I hear echoes of the scholastic Duns Scotus and his notion of the univocity of being ringing loudly here. This is an invitation into another line, a counter witness, from within the Western theological tradition for constructing a compelling and historical rooted ecotheology.

Exploring a Deep Theological Ecology

The world is facing a profound and historically novel ecological crisis. The planet is warming at an unprecedented rate. The balance of ecosystems has been knocked out of balance. Extinction rates are accelerating at a dangerous pace. Extreme weather patterns are deepening and spreading. Environmental catastrophe threatens the whole of life. The global environmental context has natural, expected ebbs and flows, but the drive toward the current ecological moment is a purely anthropological event. It is the outworking of a specific ecological construct forged along the arc of human history. The birds and the trees have not changed their ecological impulses. It is the human actors in the drama that have broken character, and not just that, they have moved around the pieces of the set creating an entirely new scene. The picture has shifted from one of mystical sacred space to one of churning controllable machine.

⁹⁸ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 147.

⁹⁹ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 147.

The forms, voices, and stories of the Judeo-Christian tradition dominate the religious and social worlds of the West. This tradition forms the conceptual imaginary that provides the limits and vistas for epistemological constructions, ontological horizons, and fields of praxis.

Admittedly, this is far from a pure tradition. It is deeply infused by a myriad of other traditions and discourses. It is a dialogue of many voices both assimilating and excluding within the conversation. A polyphonic cacophony rises from the depths of the tradition. The primary concern for constructing a deep theological ecology is not untangling the voices in search of some pure intonation sounding beneath all the other notes, but instead it is elucidating and deconstructing the dominant images and narratives present within the tradition in order to see possibilities from within. This task brings us to the world of the biblical text, to the Origins narrative of the opening verses of the book of Genesis.

Already, here at the beginning, a plurality of voices is being heard as well as silenced. Contrary to naïve biblical hermeneutics, the Genesis narrative does not come *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. It is part of a larger cultural argument between Israelite henotheistic theology and other theologies of the Ancient Near East. The current sociopolitical dynamics and struggles of that historical moment are being re-narrated by different communities in order to promote local desired nationalistic outcomes. For Genesis and the Israelites, this means the superiority of their deity, Yahweh, over and against a world teeming with alternative deities. Biblical scholar and commentator Gordon Wenham sums up the critical consensus when he writes that Genesis is “a polemic against many of the commonly received notions about the gods and man” present in the Ancient Near East.¹⁰⁰ This polemic sounds most loudly and clearly when placed within the most pressing sociopolitical situation facing the Israelites during the narrative’s composition.

¹⁰⁰ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), xlvii.

Text critical scholarship dates the first creation narrative of Genesis from the P, or Priestly, source to the time of the Babylonian exile during the 6th century BCE.¹⁰¹ The nation of Israel found itself with its capital, Jerusalem, decimated. Its power elites and intellectuals had been defeated, captured, and marched into exile being held captive in Babylon. The narrative's provenance is Babylon making it an exilic text in terms of geography. The date and location of composition means that the primary interlocutor for the opening chapter of Genesis would be the politically dominant Babylonian theology and its creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*. Brueggemann puts it bluntly when he contends that the first Hebrew creation narrative serves "as a refutation of Babylonian theological claims."¹⁰² There is a conversation being had.

The *Enuma Elish* tells the story of the rise of the Babylon's patron god Marduk.¹⁰³ It is a story filled with drama, intrigue, violence, and even some comedy. The story begins with the two originary water gods, the masculine freshwater Apsu and the feminine saltwater Tiamat. As they let their waters mingle together, a new generation of younger warrior deities is born. The most important of these first divine children is the god Ea. After a time, the father god Apsu becomes weary of his new children because of their incessant loud noise, so he plots filicide to bring peace and quiet back to his world. Ea catches wind of these plans and he reverses the script committing patricide against Apsu. Ea crowns himself new king of the divine court.

A second generation of divine children is born to the new king Ea after the initial drama and killings. Among this next generation is Marduk. He is Ea's pride and joy. He is described as strong, powerful, and erect. His entire body is described as large and powerful and his head is

¹⁰¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 14.

¹⁰² Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 25.

¹⁰³ Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 9.

described as being of an incredible size. All his senses were impeccable. He easily rose in stature above all his siblings.

After Marduk rises to power, the story returns to Tiamat, the watery primordial mother of creation. She has remarried. Her new husband, Kingu, is encouraging her to rebel against the treasonous and murderous Ea and his divine assembly. She decides to create great serpent-like monsters to help her vanquish her enemies and reclaim her rightful place as head of the divine community.

Confronted with Tiamat's ferocious monsters, Ea and the other gods cower in fear. They are dismayed. What will they do against this seemingly impossible threat? This is when Marduk steps to center stage. He tells his fellow gods that he will challenge Tiamat under one condition. He wants to be declared ruler of the divine assembly should he defeat his grandmother. The divine community agrees. The young warrior Marduk armed with the power of storms and lightning goes out to battle. He slays Tiamat. He returns triumphantly to take his seat as ruler of the divine assembly. His first act as the newly established head of the divine community is to dismember the corpse of his grandmother. He crushes her head. He sprinkles her blood into the wind. Then he rips her in two, using one half to make a new heavens and the other half to make a new earth. He then takes Tiamat's co-conspirator Kingu and has Ea slit his throat. He uses the blood of Kingu to create humans. These new humans are put to work in order to allow the gods to be free from labor in order to enjoy a life of leisure.

This story was liturgically rehearsed each year as part of the Babylonian festival of the new year.¹⁰⁴ It was designed to structure and control the Babylonian social imaginary. It functioned to provide divine sanction for Babylonian political authority. Babylon was the

¹⁰⁴ Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 9.

political corollary of the theological Marduk. This can be thought of as a political incarnational theology of power and dominance. Keller sums up the narrative's reifying strength in this way, "The *Enuma Elish* served not just to commemorate the cosmogonic deed, but to justify therewith the political hegemony of the city-state of Babylon."¹⁰⁵ Söelle and Cloyes further describe the nature of this hegemony as "a prescription for social inequality" arguing that "the [Babylonian] King was God's representative on earth; the palace elites enjoyed the wealth and power of life at court; the mass of people labored."¹⁰⁶ Both political nationalism and social oppression are built into the discursive power structure of the *Enuma Elish*. This is the foil against which the biblical creation narrative works.

Before moving onto the biblical narrative, it will be illuminating to explore Keller's work on the nexus of meanings surrounding Tiamat, which she develops masterfully in her work on *tehomitic* theology, *The Face of the Deep*. Tiamat is crucial because she is the very concrete *ex*, the *out of*, of the Babylonian creation myth. Her body is the material *out of* which heavens and earth are wrought. Yet, it is not enough to simply say that creation comes out of the divine body of the first goddess. This borders too closely to the simplistic idealism of the concept of Mother Earth. Keller reminds the reader that creation *ex* Tiamat is not the peaceful notion of a birth out of the divine consenting waters of Tiamat, but the product of usurpation and bloody slaughter of grandmother by grandson.¹⁰⁷ This could be envisaged as an event of divine rape. The narrative says that Marduk sends a mighty storm into the mouth of Tiamat filling and distending her belly in a morbid parody of pregnancy. She is unable to move. Finally, she is pierced with a bolt of

¹⁰⁵ Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 106.

¹⁰⁶ Dorothee Söelle and Shirley A. Cloyes, *To Work and To Love: A Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 12.

¹⁰⁷ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 28.

lightning, a primeval penetration. Going into and penetrating echo from the sematic field of the erotic. This is a deep and disturbing patriarchal violence. This is the creation *ex* Tiamat of the *Enuma Elish*. Furthermore, as is far too often the case in the context of rape, the victim is then blamed. Keller contends that the story narrates, “the dramatic metamorphosis of Tiamat from loving mother of the gods to their direst enemy.”¹⁰⁸ She who tried to protect her children against Apsu’s desire to destroy them, she who cried out to save her children, she who desired to bear the pain of her progeny, she is the one who is not only vanquished by demonized.¹⁰⁹ The originary feminine divine presence is not only destroyed but also mutilated. Her memory is dirtied. Her reputation soiled.

The *Enuma Elish* inscribes misogyny over the feminine face flowing along the waters of the deep *out of* which creation emerges. The comingling waters of differentiated transcending love have been overcome by the rigid violence of arbitrary binaries and rigid separations. Drawing on art historian Bram Dijkstra’s work on fantasies of feminine evil from the world of 20th turn-of-the-century art, Keller notes the way in which the “aquatic female” still lives on in “more sinuous and local incarnations.”¹¹⁰ Dijkstra’s work explores the “vast nineteenth-century visual vocabulary of mermaids, sprites, nixies, [and] sirens.”¹¹¹ In the ancient text of the *Enuma Elish*, the feminine sacred has been slain, but as a conceptual construct she is never fully dead. She always comes flooding back against all the forces of repression, or what Keller calls *tehomophobia*.

¹⁰⁸ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 28.

¹⁰⁹ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 29.

¹¹⁰ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 31.

¹¹¹ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 31.

Keller's work provides a devastating critique of the patriarchy and misogyny inherent in the ancient Babylonian theology of creation. This theology gets translated again and again throughout history finding and creating ever-new iterations and intonations in new contexts. While Keller's *tehomic* hermeneutics reveal much, there is an extent to which they obscure. She frames the *Enuma Elish* as a text of gender struggle and feminine negation. But, is there not an affirmation within the negation? Is there not an antithesis to the thesis? A *tehomic* theology embraces the chaos of the watery deep. It refuses to return to a reinforcement of binaries. It understands creation emerging from "vital space" and "a matrix of possibilities."¹¹²

There is another way to read the murder of Tiamat, a way that creates space for an affirmation. This is not to deny the violence of the negation, but instead it is to see a greater depth. It is an expansion of Tiamat's nexus of meaning.

The death of the feminine deity can be seen as the birth of the sacred creation. The mutilation of the divine corpse can be interpreted as a divinization of dust. The creation is imbued with sacred significance because it is created *ex deo*, out of God. From this perspective, the earth community is not just the stuff of stars, but also the stuff of gods. This is a morbid *pancarnational*, to borrow a term from Keller, deep theological ecology of divine death and sacred recycling positing a radically strange entanglement of the concepts of creator and creature, divine and natural, god and human. If the biblical tradition is to be a resource for a deep theological ecology, it must be seen to what extent the narrative of Genesis embraces this entanglement.

Against these rich and complex political, social, and gender dynamics of the Babylonian creation myth, the priestly creation narrative of Genesis 1 is composed providing an alternative

¹¹² Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 21.

theological imaginary for framing a comprehensive world story, or theological ecology. There are two temptations among commentators when explicating the Genesis narrative in conversation with other Ancient Near Eastern texts. On the one hand, some readers try to purge the biblical story of any originality seeing it as nothing more than a sterile replication or redaction of older creation myths. This tends to be the bent of the more liberal tradition of source critical scholarship. On the other hand, some readers attempt to divest the biblical text of any overlap with other shared cultural meanings and stories of the broader Near Eastern region. They see the text as sounding a pure and unique theological note against all the others. This tends to be the prerogative of the more conservative and ecclesial scholars. Somewhere between these two alternatives seems the most productive interpretative route forward. It is necessary to recognize the range of possibilities that includes both reuse and novelty. This recognizes the nature of the text as polyphonic and conversational. A conversation is not simply a repetition of something already said, nor is it something out of the blue; unrelated to any context; it is the merging of the two.

A brief summary of the priestly creation narrative of Genesis outlining its main contours will be helpful at this juncture. Admittedly, this is no pure, unbiased account. Any summary is problematic, because it is already engaged in the interpretive act. There is no bottom, no base or foundation from which to build, but nonetheless it is useful to delineate some field of linguistic and symbolic space for clarifying the moves that will be made toward the construction of a deep theological ecology.

The text begins with a summary statement asserting that at the beginning God creates the heavens and the earth. At this most nascent stage in the narrative, the earth is described as being formless and void marked only by “the face of the deep.” This deep is the *tehom* Keller spends

so much time reflecting upon. A spirit or wind from God then sweeps, hovers, or vibrates over the *tehom*. Next, God begins the creative event by the act of speaking. The refrain for the creative act throughout the narrative is: “God said, let there be.” To begin, God asks for, or summons, light to come onto the scene. After each movement in the unfolding creation event, the narrative affirms the goodness of that which has been created. After the light brightens the scene, the text affirms that this was good. After the speaking comes the separating. The idea is that God is pulling things apart, rending them open. The allusion to the opening up and separating the body of Tiamat can be heard echoing in the background. The light and the darkness which had presumably been swirling and mingling together are separated one from the other in order to make day and night. Once day and night are established, the creative action of the first day is brought to an end by the syncopated phrase that “there was evening and morning” on the first day. This repetitious phrase provides the ending note for each stanza of the narrative’s creative advance.

Following from the first day of creative happening with the advent of light, the same general format of God speaking, creative events happening, and the day coming to an end repeats itself through seven days or movements of creation. After the light comes the sky. After the sky comes earth and vegetation. Next, the sun, moon, and stars burst onto the scene. Fish and animals are next, followed by humans. The narrative reaches its end point in rest. On the final day God looks back at the process of the emergence of the world and all within it and simply rests.

The resonances and differences between the *Enuma Elish* and the biblical creation narrative are both stark and subtle. It is here in the interplay between the two textual voices that the language for a deep theological ecology emerges.

In the history of interpretation, the central question for the development of a theological ecology has been that of *creatio ex*, creation out of. What stands as the object of the preposition? Creation out of what, this is the question. This is the crux of the issue, the point around which the conversation has rotated. Traditional theological discourse has placed *nihilo*, nothing, as the object of the preposition. *Creatio ex nihilo* has become the preferred theological formulation in both ecclesial and academic settings. In many cases, it has ascended to the status of core Christian doctrine. Yet, this doctrine is dubiously held on both historical and theological grounds.

Historically, Gerhard May has traced the development of this doctrine back to the late second century CE and the gnostic theologian Basilides. This is notable on two accounts. First, it creates a great irony for traditional orthodoxy to embrace a doctrine formulated by a heretical thinker. Second, this means that contrary to the contention purveyed by many *creatio ex nihilo* proponents, the doctrine is not something assumed by the Genesis narrative. May puts his conclusion concisely when he writes, “a firm, unambiguously formulated doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not worked out in ancient Jewry.”¹¹³ May notes that the step from the available theological resources to a doctrine of creation out of nothing is simple enough.¹¹⁴ This makes it significant that the step was never made. It implies a conscious decision to not make this step. If the Jewish theology that forms the essential background and foundation for Christian theology denies a doctrine of creation out of nothing and the doctrine was first formulated by a thinker in the heretical tradition, then it exposes to serious question any interpretation that employs this doctrine on account of it being a historic orthodox theological doctrine of the church.

¹¹³ Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of the “Creation out of Nothing” in Early Christian Thought* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 23.

¹¹⁴ May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 23.

The step toward a doctrine of creation out of nothing is the product of a 2nd century correlative theology that sought to connect the God of the biblical witness with the god of Greek Platonic philosophy. May describes the situation this way, “How to reconcile the idea of the God who creates freely and unconditionally with the concepts of Greek metaphysics now becomes a central theme of Christian theology.”¹¹⁵ Interestingly, Paul Copan and William Lane Craig in providing a defense for the traditional formulation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* admit the extent to which the church fathers who developed this idea were “heavily influenced by Greek thought.”¹¹⁶ This exposes creation out of nothing as a means for doing theology in a particular culture context. It is more the product of speaking in the language of Platonic philosophical parlance than either a biblical idea or central Judeo-Christian concept. There appears to be no solid historical reason for embracing this doctrine as essential. Perhaps there could be reformulations in dialogue with new milieus, but this is not the case for those attempting to defend the traditional formulations. Jürgen Moltmann provides an example that uses the language of the doctrine but reworks it so substantially in a different context by drawing on the later Jewish mystical idea of *zim-zum* that it does not resemble anything near the *creatio ex nihilo* of traditional orthodoxy. The nothing of creation for Moltmann is a self-created *nihil* of divine withdrawal or making space and not an absolute *nihil* of philosophy.¹¹⁷

Before coming to the theological critique of *ex nihilo*, it is necessary to bring forward the ancient creation stories once again. The contrasts between the narratives often get emphasized over the comparisons. Brueggemann tips his hand in this direction with his comment, “There is

¹¹⁵ May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 2.

¹¹⁶ Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 147.

¹¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 86-93.

no doubt that the text utilizes older materials... However, the text before us transforms these older materials to serve a quite new purpose.”¹¹⁸ Yes, there is something new, but there is also a healthy dose of the old as well. The presence of the old invites an interpretive lingering.

Interpretations that highlight contrast and novelty draw out the stark distinctions between the narratives. For example, the Babylonian myth is characterized by violence and struggle between the gods, whereas the Hebrew story is seemingly violence and conflict free. There is a clearly polytheistic flavor to the Babylonian story, while the Genesis account appears to be monotheistic. The *Enuma Elish* envisions humans as created to be laborers doing the work the gods would rather not do, while Genesis pictures humans blessed and created in the likeness of God and then tasked with the responsibility to fill and care for the earth. These are all significant and notable, but they are not primal enough. They each invite further deconstruction. They do not go back to the primordial depths, to the mysterious waters of the deep sloshing at the beginning. Keller has made it impossible to tread through a theology of creation without getting wet, without staring into “the face of the deep” leering back from the second verse of the first chapter of Genesis. Is the visage the image of utter nothingness as with creation *ex nihilo*, or is it something else? What is creation *out of*? This is the central question for theological ecology.

A danger when constructing a theological ecology is the tendency to begin at the end. This is to take Genesis 1:28 over Genesis 1:2 as the theologically formative text. This move places action over existence. Genesis 1:28 is concerned with God’s command to the first humans to fill and have dominion in relation to the earth. When the end is at the beginning, the anthropological becomes primary. The human is extracted from full and total participation in both the community of creation and the Divine milieu. This extraction is always upward. It

¹¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 24.

privileges and justifies hierarchy. Regardless of how graciously one interprets the dominological text of Genesis 1:28 in terms of good stewardship, as biblical scholar Richard Bauckham contends, it is still “bound to be misunderstood and abused unless the fundamental solidarity of humans with the rest of creation is recognized as [its] context.”¹¹⁹ Yet, even Bauckham’s contention does not go deep enough. It needs further radicalization. The challenge is to recognize not only human solidarity with the community of creation, but also human solidarity with the Divine existence. This is the place of deep theological ecology where “higher levels of fluent harmony” arise.¹²⁰ This will only happen through a return to the beginning. The imperative of Genesis 1:28 must soak back into the dark watery recesses of the indicative of Genesis 1:2. The beginning must once again come before the end. This is the textual surface that needs close attention.

Considering the ancient creation narratives, there is a sense in which the comparisons are haunting below the surface of the contrasts. Submerged connections constitute the hermeneutically important level for the construction of a deep theological ecology. A simple example is that of the monotheism / polytheism contrast. The contrast sees Genesis affirming monotheism over and against polytheism. Wenham sees the theological vision of Genesis 1 in this way: “God is without peer and competitor. He does not have to establish his power in struggle with other members of a polytheistic pantheon.”¹²¹ This vision drips with the language of domination and supremacy. It extols the one over and against the many. It creates no space for the idea of mutuality and cooperation. This dominologically informed language of contrast

¹¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 28.

¹²⁰ Roland Faber, “Ecotheology, Ecoprocess, and Ecotheosis: A Theopoetical Intervention,” *Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift* 12, no. 1 (2008): 90.

¹²¹ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 38.

obscures the language of the multiple. It disregards the divine wind or spirit that hovers over the deep. This seems to be a clear inclusion of more than the singular in the divine. The language also fails to take seriously the plurality of Genesis 1:26, which says “let us make humankind in our image.” The sense is one of God sitting among a heavenly court.¹²² Furthermore, sexual plurality, both male and female, within the human community comes from being made in the image of God in Genesis 1:27. There are certainly ways to avoid the lurking presence of a poly within the Divine existence such as dismissing the plural of verse 26 as nothing more than a royal “we.” But, there seems to be too many cracks or lines where the poly seeps into the traditional monotheism. Water is leaking through the cracks. Where is it coming from?

This brings us squarely to “the face of the deep,” that watery abyss intruding into what is supposed to be the utter nothingness before whatever comes to be. This is where comparison is most fully present. This is the point of creation out of. Here also is the point of theological critique of *creatio ex nihilo*. Genesis 1:2 refuses to submit to relegation to nothingness. It is there. The ink refuses to be blotted out from the page.

If the text will not disappear of its own accord, then a hermeneutical tool that masks the text is needed, enter the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This doctrine slips like a mask over the face staring, gazing out from the deep. The mask attempts to cover up any memory of what lies beneath. It is like the flag draped over the casket returning from war. The hope is that the reality will be covered up. In the case of the flag and casket, the gruesome violence and destruction of war is to be covered by the ideological discourse of patriotism and love of country. The question becomes: What is this doctrine covering up? What can be seen peering out from the eyes of the deep? What is beneath the ideo-theological suppression?

¹²² Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 27.

It is none other than Tiamat. The watery goddess of the *Enuma Elish*. She is staring, looking silently up from the dry ink of Genesis 1:2. Keller describes the Babylonian epic as the “mythological intertext of Genesis 1:2.”¹²³ It fits the historical and social context of a Babylonian provenance during Israelite exile, which source criticism attributes to the narrative. Furthermore, a watery presence at the beginning marks both texts. The wind blowing over the waters of Genesis echoes the wind being blown into Tiamat disabling her before her flashing slaughter at the hands of Marduk.¹²⁴ The traces are there. This is subtle, yet essential, comparison.

The temptation is to see the crucial issue for a deep theological ecology as what Genesis does with this subtle presence of the divine feminine. Keller describes how this “question has haunted me through decades: does Genesis’ allusion to the theomachy reinscribe, subvert, or simply side-step the warrior matricide?”¹²⁵ This is certainly the prime question for a feminist reading, but it does not seem as essential for an ecological reading. An ecological reading need only take off the mask of creation out of nothing. It need only bring the goddess back onto the scene. Granted, it makes it that much more compelling to assert with Keller that Genesis 1 “betrays no fear of the dark, no demonization of the deep, of the sea, its she and its dragons...no trace of divine warrior or cultural misogyny,” but this is not a must.¹²⁶

Between the *Enuma Elish*, the priestly biblical creation story, and Keller’s deconstructive dialogue between the two, a wide space for a reading capable of fueling a deep theological ecology opens. The story goes like this. In the beginning, God was not alone, not a singular masculine monarch. God was not absolute power, nor absolutely independent. No, in the

¹²³ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 31.

¹²⁴ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 107.

¹²⁵ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 30.

¹²⁶ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 30.

beginning, God was present with God. God was present as spirit, wind, or storm vibrating, hovering, and sweeping over God present as watery, open, and unstructured deep. God was present in freedom, the freedom to soar along as wind and the freedom to bubble and ripple as water. God mingles as differentiated unity. Finally, the Divine Breath takes form as creative speech that actualizes the first event of creative advance from the infinite depths of the watery Divine Possibilities. Creation becomes the unifying event of separation within the divine matrix of the motherly body of the primordial waters. An explosion of unifying differentiation follows. The advent of the plural in endless relationships is the creative event. Each new advance, each creative moment of becoming, is always nested in the context of the divine milieu of Spirit and Water. God is in creation as both the endless range of open possibilities of the sea and the finite moments of creative existence in the wind, which is all existence because all existence is creative, novel.

In an ecological reading, there is no violent struggle. No primal rape. No system for hierarchical domination. Surely, these get layered throughout the history of interpretation. They may be present in the text. They may not be. There is an interpretive openness. An ecological hermeneutic refuses to import the horror of the Babylonian theological matricide. Instead, the attacking wind of Marduk is transformed into the wind of caress flowing over the pregnant waters. There is no penetration. There is only loving conversation. Is the divine word of Genesis a command or request? Is it demand or lure? A dominological hermeneutic sees it as divine fiat by the singular all-powerful God-figure. An ecological reading stresses the cooperative intonations of the relationship between Genesis 1:11 and Genesis 1:12. In verse 11, God speaks saying, “let the earth bring forth vegetation.” In verse 12, the earth responds, “putting forth vegetation.” This is a working together. It is cooperative. Even more, it is relational and loving.

There cannot be true love without radical mutuality. Moltmann describes creation as *creatio ex amore Dei* contending that “creation is not a demonstration of his [sic] boundless power it is the communication of his [sic] love.”¹²⁷ Love is the framework for a deep theological ecology. It is the name given to the advance of differentiated unity. Genesis 1:28 must be put within this context. This is in contrast to the power plays of omnipotence grasped at by traditional theologies of creation.

A praxis for a deep theological ecology is participation in the mutuality of love that expresses itself in continually differentiating unity. It is an opening up. This is the differentiating element. Moltmann describes the action of God in history as consisting “essentially in opening up systems which are closed in on themselves.”¹²⁸ Yet, it is also an opening into. This is the unifying element. Moltmann equates this with “the sympathy of all things.”¹²⁹ The universe is most profoundly related at its point of deepest plurality. It is dispersion that unites in a web of interconnections and relations. The alienation of difference is overcome in the milieu of Divine Love.

A deep theological ecology overcomes anthropocentrism by locating humanity within the body of God. For this model, the beginning point is not the relationship between God and humanity, but between God and God. Humans simply enter into this divine unfolding relationship. Yet, this entering is not as something alien from the outside but an emergence from within. McFague’s notion that God is “the One who is in, with, and under the entire process of the universe” locates humans as part of this process.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 76.

¹²⁸ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 211.

¹²⁹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 213.

¹³⁰ McFague, *The Body of God*, 65.

Creation *ex nihilo* is problematic insofar as it obscures the vision of all things participating within the divine milieu. It transforms the life-giving divine presence of the waters of Genesis 1:2 into a meaningless void. It rejects multiplicity in favor of the singular. In doing all of this, it fails to grasp the sacred nature of all things. This is a greater evil than the deicide of the *Enuma Elish*. Yes, the Babylonian myth is riddled with violence, but its gruesome vision of a universe created from divine carcass still invests the world with a level sacredness. The traces of the divine mark the landscape. The creation is still in some respects divine albeit dead divinity. The doctrine of creation out of nothing leaves no trace of the divine. It not only kills the divine feminine, but it also hides the body away. Pushes it entirely out of sight and mind. It peels the face off the deep. It erases the memory of the primordial Mother. This is the ultimate sacrilege.

Working from the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as the operative theology of creation has created a context in which “Western theology...has stressed God’s separateness from creation in order to elevate God’s transcendence”¹³¹ Söelle and Cloyes outline three consequences of this theology of divine transcendence. First, it renders creation “nothing more than an arbitrary decision.”¹³² This divests the world of any inherent sacred value. If there is any value, it is only there because it is imposed from the outside. It is not organic and integral. Furthermore, the creator-creation relationship loses any trace of mutuality. It is always hierarchical. This reveals the extent to which creation out of nothing is built on defending power structures that create and sustain inequitable relationships. Second, and this builds on the first point, it “makes the world into a godless place. Insofar as God is wholly other, there can be no sanctity, no divine reality in the world.”¹³³ This opens the door for the dominant ecology that views the world as machine. It

¹³¹ Söelle and Cloyes, *To Work and To Love*, 13.

¹³² Söelle and Cloyes, *To Work and To Love*, 14.

¹³³ Söelle and Cloyes, *To Work and To Love*, 17.

is a machine to be used, abused, and exploited toward whatever ends those with the most power desire. Dust becomes dirt. It is out of place and must be removed. This triggers an endless war between the ground from which humanity came and the humans that have come from the ground. Third, it alienates human beings from the community of creation because humans, as the image bearers of the One who is removed from creation, attempt to transcend the creation as well.¹³⁴

In sum, *creatio ex nihilo* bears with it a theological ecology marked by domination, conflict, and alienation. In contrast, a deep theological ecology integrates God, world, and humans in a web of endless interconnected relations. There is no outside. Everything is inside, because it is *ex Deo*. A deep theological ecology is rooted in a doctrine of *creatio ex deo*, creation out of God. It is deep insofar as it emerges from the infinite depths of the divine milieu. It is theological insofar as it is engaged with Scripture and tradition in its speech regarding both the creator and creation. It is ecological insofar as it concerns the relations of all things. The doctrine of *creation ex Deo* provides ample resources for advancing this project.

Conclusion

To bring this chapter to a close, a return to reflection upon praxis is necessary. The pressing question is: How can a deep theological ecology rooted in the doctrine of creation out of God function in the context of the current ecological crisis? Process philosopher and theologian Roland Faber sees the way forward as a process of “not try[ing] to preserve any status quo of society and the ecological present of the Earth but transform the Earth and ourselves toward instabilities of deeper intensities and harmonies of deeper complexities.”¹³⁵ A deep theological ecology does not need more incarnation. It does not need more divine presence; this is already

¹³⁴ Söelle and Cloyes, *To Work and To Love*, 20.

¹³⁵ Faber, “Ecotheology, Ecoprocess, and Ecotheosis,” 115.

assumed within the model. It needs a rich spirituality of *theosis* to connect individuals with God. It needs new liturgies of *theosis* to connect communities to God. To move toward deeper union with God, if the world is *creatio ex deo*, is to move deeper into the world. This suggests the need for a theological education steeped in ecoliteracy where knowledge of God and world blend distinctly together.

Ultimately, against the temptation to use and exploit the planet seeing it as nothing more than a means to an end, a deep theological ecology calls humanity back into a loving relationship of deep mutuality with the community of creation. This relationship must preserve the creative bent toward differentiated unity. The power of monocultures that consume, conform, and flatten must be countered with the force of polycultures that open, change, and relate in an endless dance toward an open future. This is the new cultural ethos for churches becoming ecochurches.

CHAPTER 3

Feminist Ecclesiology for Ecochurches

Introduction

This chapter explores the contours of feminist ecclesiology through tracking the ecclesiological visions of three important feminist theologians. Feminist ecclesiology offers an alternative discursive space outside the patriarchal status quo that can be generative for developing a set of ecclesiological commitments for ecochurches. This is a reminder that ecochurches must be intersectional tending to both ecological sustainability and social justice. Human-to-human relationality is always connected to human-to-other-than-human relationality. This is the post-dualistic framework offered by the deep theological ecology developed in the previous chapter.

The first vision comes from one of the mothers of modern feminist theology – Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Fiorenza’s ecclesiological perspective was forged in the crucible of the second wave feminist movement beginning the 1960s and in some sense functions as an important canonical text in the corpus of feminist theology. The next visions emerge from two second generation feminist theologians coming after Fiorenza – Serene Jones and Natalie K. Watson. These projects represent the next phase in feminist ecclesiology as they build upon and challenge the foundations set by the first generation. They are seeking to address new contexts and fresh questions. Together these three voices provide a well-rounded picture of the modern feminist ecclesiological discourse.

The challenge will be to listen for points of resonance, emphasis, and dissonance between each of the ecclesiologies in order to develop critical suggestions for the development of a constructive, feminist-informed liberative ecclesiology for 21st century ecochurches. I am

entering into this project, doing my looking and listening, as a 30 something cisgender male theologian working as a pastor at a progressive mainline protestant church in Southern California. This is important to place at the beginning of this ecclesiological endeavor. It recognizes the irreducibly subjective nature of the theological task. It is both dishonest and dangerous to assume one looks from some place of universal objectivity. We are all looking from somewhere and we need to know and name that place.

I hope to proceed with a hermeneutic of humility recognizing that my looking is from a particular place of privilege not afforded many. Thus, the aim of this chapter is not to develop a feminist ecclesiology or pronounce certain judgments on feminist ecclesiology or even make some sort of evaluation of feminist ecclesiology. None of these are even possible from my location in relation to the discourse. All of these tasks are the prerogative of my feminist sister theologians. Yet, this does not mean that as a male I have no place in the conversation. In fact, quite the opposite. Rosemary Radford Ruether locates the male perspective pointedly when she writes, “Sexism is not just a female problem...it is primarily a male problem that men have imposed on women.”¹³⁶ Ruether sees the project of creating a new liberated humanity as a necessarily collaborative effort between both females and males working toward holistic liberation.¹³⁷

Jürgen Moltmann takes this notion seriously in his book on theological method, *Experiences in Theology*, where he works to develop a liberation theology for oppressors including a “feminist theology for men.”¹³⁸ Central to this endeavor is the contention that both

¹³⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 189.

¹³⁷ Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 189.

¹³⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 184.

oppressed and oppressor are in need of liberation. Moltmann contends, “The liberation of the oppressors...is an experience which requires more than good will: the master has to die so that the brother [and sister] can be born. Control over others must give way to community.”¹³⁹ In this vein that is suggested by Ruether and charted by Moltmann, I hope to explore feminist ecclesiology listening for those lessons that will help shape a truly liberated and deeply egalitarian future for the communities of faith which I serve that are comprised of both women, men, and non-binaries persons. This approach should help to guard against the dangers of both appropriation and cooptation.

In the most concrete terms, my aim is simply to listen carefully and honestly to the voices of my sister theologians in the hope that my understanding of what it means to be the church might be deepened and broadened in order that I might better serve ecochurches as we seek to inhabit God’s present hope for the world as a community of radical equality and ecological existence. Furthermore, in my seeking toward this end, I hope that others in similar places will discover a helpful guide for their own journey along this way.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: The Discipleship Community of Equals

A few brief biographical notes on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza will be helpful for placing her ecclesiological project in an appropriate context. Fiorenza is currently the Krister Stendhal Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School. She is one of the, if not the, chief pioneer of modern feminist biblical interpretation. Fiorenza’s formal theological education took place during the 1950s and 60s in Germany at the Universities of Würzburg and Münster. In 1970, she took the position of Assistant Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

¹³⁹ Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 186-187.

Since this move, her professional academic career has been in the context of American schools of theology and religion. Ecclesialogically, Fiorenza locates herself within the Roman Catholic tradition. Her primary work in the field of ecclesiology was first published in 1983 titled *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-ology of Liberation*. This text will be the focus for tracking an initial understanding of feminist ecclesiology. This is appropriate for at least two reasons. First, the book is a compilation of essays ranging from 1964 through 1983. As such, it provides a quite comprehensive account of what she calls “the cartography of my feminist struggle,” which maps a broad swath of the development of early feminist thinking on ecclesiology.¹⁴⁰ Standing more or less at the beginning of the discourse, this text is helpful for discerning the primary questions and concerns that set the initial agenda for modern feminist ecclesiology. It will also be instructive as a contrasting voice for discerning later developments. Second, Fiorenza contends that her work “insists on women’s spiritual power of naming and shaping religious vision and community.”¹⁴¹ Fiorenza is committed to the praxis possibilities of her project. This means that her work is not meant for purely abstract conception, but instead it is meant to engage actual concrete communities in the real and lived embodied struggles for authentic expressions of a feminist ecclesiology. She is concerned for an ecclesiology that is not just from below, but one that is happening from below. Theory and praxis blend inseparably together. This connects organically with ecochurch’s privileging of materiality in the process of transformation.

These brief biographical comments help both to elucidate the milieu in which the early developments of feminist ecclesiology were forged and capture certain commitments that

1. ¹⁴⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-ology of Liberation* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 1.

¹⁴¹ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 12.

animate Fiorenza's project. In terms of the latter, independent scholar Marie Sabin succinctly describes Fiorenza's overarching biblical hermeneutical project as the task of utilizing "biblical texts and traditions as tools for empowerment."¹⁴² This is connected to Fiorenza's beginning and continuing location as a Catholic theologian. For Fiorenza, the texts and traditions that constitute the Catholic church cannot simply be jettisoned. Yet, this does not mean they are kept wholesale either. Her model of engagement with the biblical tradition can be thought of as an ecological hermeneutic insofar as it attempts to recycle and reuse traditional categories and sources for new and liberative purposes. It is dialectical. It works within the tension between a commitment to historical forms of church that are clearly and problematically patriarchal and a commitment to the empowerment of marginalized and excluded women. Maintaining this dialectic is about asserting "the power of feminist theological naming to transform patriarchal religions."¹⁴³ This a prophetic stance. It works from within. It is like Lady Wisdom in the biblical tradition who cries out for justice from within the streets of the city.¹⁴⁴ The prophetic voice works from the unsettled place within in order to bring about transformative change. Ultimately, Fiorenza roots this prophetic transformative vision within "the Christian tradition of the *basileia*, the vision of G-d's alternative world, a vision of justice, human dignity, equality, and salvation for all."¹⁴⁵ As ecochurch develops its identity as both avant-garde of a new ecological existence and a continuation of the historic movement that is the church, it can look to the dialectic wisdom of early feminist ecclesiology to discern how it might hold the distinct, and at points tenuous aspects, of its identity together.

¹⁴² Marie, Sabin, "The Bible as a Site for Struggle: Rethinking Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza," *Cross Currents* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 115.

¹⁴³ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Proverbs 1:20 (NRSV). All Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴⁵ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 10.

Two anecdotes provide an illuminative context for grasping the weight of Fiorenza's ecological hermeneutic that will drive her theological imagination and ecclesiological perspective. First, as a young woman, Fiorenza was the first woman at her university to enroll in "the full course in theology that students for the priesthood were required to take."¹⁴⁶ The mid-20th century was a starkly different world for women in the church and theological discourse than it is today. At that time, there were scant examples of women in leadership in either the church or the academy. Fiorenza was very much blazing a trail that did not yet exist. By enrolling in the theology course of study for priests, she was quite literally doing something that no woman had done before. The existential significance of taking such a path would surely come to be formative for Fiorenza's theological perspective. This would not be something easily dismissed. The experience of being a first is profoundly formative.

Second, and this provides a key insight into the general feminist milieu for Fiorenza's work, is Mary Daly's historic sermon at Harvard's Memorial Church. As a relatively young associate professor of theology at Harvard Divinity School, Daly became the first woman to preach at the church in its 336-year history in November of 1971. She took the opportunity to dramatically enact and embody her theological hermeneutic. Boston College's student newspaper *The Heights* describes this pivotal moment: "Upon closing her sermon, which had been an attack on the subordination of women through patriarchal religion, she urged her 'sisters and other esteemed members of the congregation' to join her in what she called 'an exodus from centuries of darkness.'"¹⁴⁷ Daly proceeded to leave the church mid-service in symbolic protest followed by nearly half the women and some of the men present. In contrast to Fiorenza's prophetic posture of critique from within, Daly instead opts for a posture of exodus. She chooses

¹⁴⁶ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 14.

¹⁴⁷ Barbara Flanagan, "Mary Daly leads exodus after historic sermon," *The Heights*, November 22, 1971: 1.

to become post-Catholic leaving behind the entire edifice of the Christian tradition. Daly develops what could be termed a revolutionary feminist hermeneutic built upon a complete break with all religious tradition. According to the Watson, “Daly denies the church all empowering potential for women and views the church as an institution, the main purpose of which is to destroy women and to jeopardize women’s very existence.”¹⁴⁸ Out of her revolutionary hermeneutic, Daly develops an anti-ecclesiology through her concept of “sisterhood.” The practice of “sisterhood” promotes a form of human community that denies all religion, because it is viewed as irreducibly patriarchal.¹⁴⁹ This type of anti-ecclesiology emerging from a revolutionary feminist hermeneutic provides the contrasting extremity of expression to the patriarchal church that Fiorenza finds herself working within as a trailblazer.

In the tension between Roman Catholic patriarchal ecclesiology on the one side and Dalyan revolutionary feminist anti-ecclesiology on the other side, Fiorenza sets out to chart a *via media*. She is in search of the church as “*ecclesia*, as the discipleship community of equals.”¹⁵⁰ Better yet, it should be said that she is actively and politically engaged in the struggle to carve out the discipleship community of equals from within the rigid confines of the “Constantinian capitalist model of church” rooted in a “clerical-patriarchal hierarchy.”¹⁵¹ This activist character of Fiorenza’s work is not something different from her ecclesiology. It is not an ethical emanation from, but instead a concrete embodiment of, her ecclesiology.

To be the discipleship community of equals means to be actively engaged in the process of transformation toward greater depths of radical egalitarian community in all of life. Ecochurch

¹⁴⁸ Natalie K. Watson, “Reconsidering Ecclesiology: Feminist Perspectives,” *Theology & Sexuality* 14, (March 2001): 71.

¹⁴⁹ Watson, “Reconsidering Ecclesiology,” 70.

¹⁵⁰ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 293.

¹⁵¹ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 294-295.

looks to extend this beyond just human life but into the whole of the earth's biotic community. Veli-Mattii Kärkkäinen sums up the implications of this shift for authority and power relations well when he writes: "In feminist styles of leadership, authority is exercised by standing with others and seeking to share power and authority. Power is seen as something to be multiplied and shared rather than accumulated at the top."¹⁵² Fiorenza contends, "True leadership in the community must be rooted in solidarity with each other."¹⁵³ And, we might add, solidarity with the community of creation.

Furthermore, for Fiorenza, power cannot possibly accumulate at the top, because among the community of Jesus followers, there is no longer any top. In Mark 10:42-44, Jesus responds to the request of James and John to be exalted within the community by first exposing the dominant and domineering cultural logic from which such a request emerges. Jesus says, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as rulers Lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them."¹⁵⁴ Second, Jesus tells his followers that this logic does not apply among them; he says, "But it is not so among you...."¹⁵⁵ Finally, he says that in the community of his followers the great and the first must become servants and the last if they wish to be great (Mark 10:44).¹⁵⁶ The idea is that in the community of Jesus "those in positions of dominance and power" are challenged "to become equal to those who are powerless."¹⁵⁷ This teaching is so central to the broader gospel traditions that it appears ten different times in various different iterations.¹⁵⁸ Solidarity, mutuality, and cooperation mark the internal politics of the

¹⁵² Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 189.

¹⁵³ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 305.

¹⁵⁴ Mark 10:42.

¹⁵⁵ Mark 10:43.

¹⁵⁶ Mark 10:44.

¹⁵⁷ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 305.

¹⁵⁸ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 305.

ecclesia. This is in contrast to headship, complementarity, and control. It is clear that this *via media*, far from being conservative, contains a potentially deeper radicality than Daly's revolutionary anti-ecclesiology on account of its ability to address directly the whole of life including all sides of sexual difference in its vision.

As a biblical scholar, the texts of early Christianity provide rich resources for Fiorenza to develop her ecclesiological vision. At the center of the biblical witness stands the pre-Pauline baptismal formula of Galatians 3:28 that says in Christ Jesus, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female." Fiorenza calls this the "Magna Carta of Christian feminism" with its "vision of equality, wholeness, and freedom."¹⁵⁹ This text provides a radical vision of Christian egalitarian community rooted in a Christology that deconstructs the tripartite categories of the historical oppressions along racial, class, and sex lines. Fiorenza sees ecclesiology intimately bound up in the project of making real within Christian community this vision of the Galatians text.¹⁶⁰

One of the primary ways the ecclesiological vision of the nascent Jesus movement has been obscured by patriarchal ecclesiologies has been through narrating the story of early Christianity apart from the voices and presence of women. Against this pervasive practice, Fiorenza undertakes the project of historical recovery. She works to lift up and reveal the story of women in the early church. She does this through developing and implementing an egalitarian interpretive model. This approach brings to the fore numerous exegetical insights. A few examples will be instructive. Fiorenza notes that across Paul's letters, women "exercised leadership as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and missionaries."¹⁶¹ Despite being composed in a

¹⁵⁹ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 68.

¹⁶⁰ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 71.

¹⁶¹ Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 83.

patriarchal context, the Gospels surprisingly do not place any blatantly misogynistic teachings in Jesus' mouth. Furthermore, the Gospels place women as the eyewitnesses to the key kerygmatic moments in the life of Jesus – his death, burial, and resurrection.¹⁶² Without the witness of women, the entire historical tradition falters. The Jesus story cannot be told apart from the activity and agency of women. Throughout the breadth of the biblical witness, despite all attempts at suppression, the voices of women refused to be silenced. Instead, they proclaim the *euangelion* alongside Mary mother of Jesus who in her song tells the radical egalitarian message of God's vision for the world.¹⁶³ Fiorenza's ecological hermeneutics work to amplify this pervasive choir of voices testifying to God's future justice made present in the here and now in the *ecclesia* of God, the discipleship community of equals. Ecochurches must undertake a similar project of historical recovery but in terms of bringing place and the whole of the biotic community back as a real presence in the reading of the sacred texts of the tradition.

Serene Jones: The Church of Bounded Openness

Serene Jones is currently the President of the Faculty of Union Theological Seminary as well as the Johnston Family Professor for Religion and Democracy. With Jones, this paper moves from the foundations of early first generation Roman Catholic feminist ecclesiology to second generation and Protestant feminist ecclesiology. For the first generation of feminist theologians, the patriarchal situation was stark, and the discourse provided three distinct modes for engagement. The first would be to simply accept the reality of patriarchy. The second would be to transform the system of patriarchy from within. The third would be to break with the system entirely. The first option is the non-feminist approach. The second two are the initial

¹⁶² Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 175.

¹⁶³ Luke 1:46-55.

feminist options. For the second generation of feminist theologians, the discourse has changed from an outward focus on engagement with patriarchy to an internal conversation about how to do feminism. It is this conversation that frames Jones' theological project. In her book *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Jones seeks to remap certain theological categories against the backdrop of the critical lens of feminist theory.¹⁶⁴ Ecclesiology is the final category she places under her critical feminist lens.

Similar to Fiorenza and Ruether, Jones too is trying to forge a *via media* between two extremes. The two poles forming the context for her feminist hermeneutic are radical constructivism and radical essentialism. These are two distinct modes of doing feminist theory. Constructivism conceptualizes persons as irreducibly contingent products of a vast array and complex of discourses. Identity is purely a social construct. As such, this is a post-ontological hermeneutic. There is no center, no nature, nor even a being of persons. There is just an endless flow and flux of discourses both playing and being played through particular and unique subjectivities that constitute persons. Judith Butler, the primary theoretician of feminist constructivism, expresses this idea clearly when she calls gender "a basically innovative affair."¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, for Butler and constructivists, gender is not something that one *is*, but instead something one *does*, both knowingly and unknowingly.¹⁶⁶ In this sense, gender is a happening, a participatory event. Detractors of constructivist approaches see the lack of stability within this model as inadequate for constructing a real politics of liberation. There is no ground from which one might protest. In contrast to constructivism, essentialism offers a conception of

¹⁶⁴ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 19.

¹⁶⁵ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 531.

¹⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

persons marked by ontological stability and depth. The idea is that there is an enduring and universal essence that surfaces with each person. There is a concretization of an ideal. The Platonic flavor of essentialism is palpable at this point. In terms of gender analysis, there is a uniquely feminine essence and a uniquely masculine essence that mark out sexual difference. The most obvious problematic for essentialism is the emerging recognition of the queer as well as historical and cultural difference. This deeply problematizes the binaries that tend to undergird essentialist models.

Between these two hermeneutical poles, Jones embraces what she calls strategic essentialism. This approach takes its cues from Luce Irigaray's feminist development. Jones narrates the movement from the early Irigaray, who stresses deconstructing the Western historical and cultural narrative of "phallogentrism," to the late Irigaray, who builds an essentialism rooted in the ideas of envelopment and wonder.¹⁶⁷ Strategic essentialism argues for "a space of bounded openness."¹⁶⁸ It recognizes that all essentialisms are contingent and constructed, but at the same time, that they are necessary for the work of feminist struggle for authentic existence. Each new generation is called to engage in the work of carving out new liberative visions outside the constraints of dominating and oppressive narratives. Strategic essentialism is a dual praxis of deconstruction and construction. It recognizes that these two endeavors are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are inextricably connected. Finally, Jones frames this feminist hermeneutic theologically as "eschatological essentialism." Eschatological essentialism works in the space "between normative truth and prophetic suspicion."¹⁶⁹ This

¹⁶⁷ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 42-43.

¹⁶⁸ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 43.

¹⁶⁹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 54.

approach is predicated on an embrace of God's liberative vision for all of creation and the prophetic critique of those systems that stand in the way of realizing this hope for the world.

Upon this foundation, Jones argues for what she calls "an eschatological essentialist vision of the church."¹⁷⁰ She begins constructing her ecclesiology by delineating eight features of what it means to be church that emerged from her Tuesday night women's group that she leads at her church. First, the church is rooted in Scripture and its account of God's gracious relationship with the world.¹⁷¹ Second, the church is a community that lives in relation to a communal loving God. Third, the church is where the story of God's liberative history found in Scripture is told in a rich plurality of ways. Fourth, this story is not simply told. It is inhabited and lived into communally. Fifth, the church inhabits this story by imitation and performance seeking to allow the reality of the story to come to ever fresh expression in each new moment. Sixth, the church does not choose to be part of this story. It finds itself called into this liberating divine narrative. Seventh, the church is the normative community taking precedent over and shaping all other communities its members inhabit. It shapes its members' way in the world. Eighth, the church recognizes its identity as a sinful community seeing the ways it has been implicated in all manner of injustice.

As Jones and her women's group discussed these eight marks of the church they had just articulated, the ecclesiological dissonance between the empirical and the normative church was being keenly felt.¹⁷² For too many women, the normative vision of what the church *should be* is all too often absent from the empirical reality of what the church *is* and women's experiences in churches. Jones notes that this was especially true for the women in her group coming of age in

¹⁷⁰ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 155.

¹⁷¹ For the eight marks of church see Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 155-159.

¹⁷² Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 159.

the church during the 60s, 70s, and 80s. These women experienced rejection and suppression of their voices in their churches. As a testament to the work of feminist theologians, the church has been shifting over the last fifty years. It is certainly nowhere near the normative eschatological vision of the liberative community centered along the way of Jesus, but more and more pastors are now women, liturgical language is increasingly gender inclusive, the LGBTQIA community is being welcomed by more faith communities, and issues of justice are becoming more central to ecclesial praxis. Change is slowly happening within the church. As women of faith are returning to church, they are finding progressive churches that look different from when they left. Jones notes that many of those women of faith who left the church found it difficult to find true spiritual community outside the walls of the church in a culture that was rapidly plunging into deeper modes of individualism. Jones captures the contextual shift adroitly when she writes, “As feminists of faith, their major struggle was no longer to escape the prison of an oppressive community; instead, their challenge has become to find community in an otherwise atomized and isolated culture of individuals.”¹⁷³ In a different way, the need for a feminist ecclesiology might be even more pressing in the new post-communal radical individualism of the 21st century. The same holds true for ecochurch as it searches for new ecological ways of being. This collective problem needs a collective response.

Jones develops her ecclesiology in conversation with Luther and Calvin. For Jones, the church might be called a hermeneutical community. This means the church is a site for the performance of bounded openness. It gives communal embodiment to an eschatological essentialism.

¹⁷³ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 160-161.

From Luther, Jones draws on the idea of the church as the community of saints gathered together in a common faith that has embraced the good news that “in Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are promised eternal life.”¹⁷⁴ For Luther, it is God’s initiative and action in grace that brings the church into existence. From this place of grace, the church takes as its primary task the “joyous act of bearing witness to God’s reconciling the world to Godself in Jesus Christ.”¹⁷⁵ Most importantly, the church as community of grace means the church finds “permission to stop being obsessed about its own merit and to truly open itself to others.”¹⁷⁶ Thus, the church as the grace-filled community of saints provides theological impetus for the openness of Jones’ ecclesiological vision.

Jones turns to the ecclesiology of Calvin in search of theological material that might help to concretely bind this open community lest it be so open it dissipates away. The notion of bounded is not about restriction; instead, it is about embodiment. It is about making real and tangible the radically open community through specific praxis. One of Calvin’s primary metaphors for the church is that of mother. The church is imaged as the mother whose womb and breasts birth and nurture persons of faith. For Jones, the “womb emphasizes the material and embodied ways in which the church forms us. We are made from the tissue of her many practices, rituals, institutional forms, and orders as well as from the numerous human relationships she engenders.”¹⁷⁷ Jones sees this type of being bound as essential in the context of a fragmented and fragmenting world marred by sin.

Drawing Luther and Calvin together alongside her own ecclesial experience, Jones develops her ecclesiology of bounded openness. In this ecclesiology, she is attempting to bring

¹⁷⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 162.

¹⁷⁵ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 163.

¹⁷⁶ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 163.

¹⁷⁷ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 167.

together the vision of the normative church with the reality of the empirical church in order to provide one unified and coherent ecclesiology. The material and theoretical are held beautifully together. Jones begins with grace. The church is first and foremost a gift. This is the center of her ecclesiological vision and everything else follows from here. According to Jones, this idea carries with it two necessary stories about God's relation to the church. First, God adorns the church.¹⁷⁸ God clothes the church in the splendor and beauty of faith, hope, and love. These envelop the church delineating specific boundaries for the community. These adornments are expressed bodily in the church through things like ritual, liturgy, and service. This ecclesiology is deeply institutional insofar as the institution is the site where "the church knits back together and holds tightly and safely those broken by the fragmenting and dominating powers."¹⁷⁹ This resonates with Letty Russell's "hot-house ecclesiology" that images the church as "a sanctuary, a place of safety for all who enter, and especially for those who are the most marginal, weak or despised of any community."¹⁸⁰ Yet, the story of adornment is not enough. It lacks a critical lens. A second story is needed. In this second story, God speaks to the church. The word spoken is always grace and grace is always transformative. Jones says that "grace disarticulates the sins of the community, and God's judgment ruptures its boundaries, exposing the arrogance of its false adornments and undoing its many pretensions."¹⁸¹ The speaking of God keeps the adornment of the community faithful and true. Ultimately, Jones' ecclesiology understands the church as that community which is both done and undone by God's grace. The church is the tapestry of

¹⁷⁸ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 171.

¹⁷⁹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 171.

¹⁸⁰ Letty Russell, "Hot-House Ecclesiology: A Feminist Interpretation of the Church," *The Ecumenical Review* 53, no. 1 (January 2001): 48.

¹⁸¹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 171.

Christian community that is perpetually woven and unwoven and in this weaving the church is being drawn into God's future for the world unfolding in the here and now.

Natalie K. Watson: A Pluralistic Ecclesiology of the Dispersed Center

Natalie K. Watson is currently Commissioning Editor at SCM Press. She received her PhD in Theology from the University of Durham. Like Jones, she is a second generation feminist theologian. In her article "Reconsidering Ecclesiology: Feminist Perspectives," Watson works to articulate an ecclesiology that moves beyond what she considers the false binary between inventive and critical feminist ecclesiologies.¹⁸² Inventive ecclesiologies are those that think feminist ecclesiology must invent a new church for women. Critical ecclesiologies are those that engage primarily in critical dialogue with the dominant ecclesiologies. In other words, she is looking to move beyond the ecclesiological impasse created by the first generation of feminist theology. Like each of the previous theologians, she too is looking for *via media* to move forward in providing a constructive vision for feminist ecclesiology. For Watson, this middle way is between first generation feminist theology on the one side and the broad reflection of the mainstream church on the other. Watson contends that first generation feminist theologians like Fiorenza and Ruether with their rigid focus on women's experience within the church fail to enter into "a critical, creative and constructive dialogue with ecclesiologies in the context of a more systematic approach to theology."¹⁸³ Essentially, Watson is looking not just to reclaim church as a space for women, but to reconsider the entirety of the dominant ecclesiological discourse from the perspective of women. Where Fiorenza and Ruether are lifting up what has been forgotten, left behind, or marginalized, Watson wants to include these voices and then press

¹⁸² Watson, "Reconsidering Ecclesiology," 59.

¹⁸³ Watson, "Reconsidering Ecclesiology," 61.

further into the dominant discourse in order to reinscribe women's presence into a discourse that has always been for women insofar as the church has always been a church that embraces sexual difference containing both women and men. The point is that women have both the right and authority to listen and speak ecclesialogically even if men have chosen to ignore or suppress their voices and perspectives. Jones is engaged in precisely this mode of ecclesiology through her engagement with Luther and Calvin. It is about naming both the patriarchy and the grace present in the dominant ecclesiological discourse. A patriarchal speaking does not preclude feminist listening and creative interpretive possibilities.

Watson is in search of a pluralistic ecclesiology that has enough interpretive space to include the rich manifold of ways in which women *are* the church.¹⁸⁴ To this end, she layouts a fourfold methodology for feminist ecclesiology. The first movement is concerned with reframing and redefining. A feminist reframing of ecclesiology means opening up the discourse to include both theory and praxis. Against the patriarchal privileging of the disembodied word, the inclusion of praxis as a source for ecclesiology reinscribes women's lives into the center of ecclesiological reflection. Watson puts it this way, "If the subject of ecclesiology is anything that happens in the church, women are to claim that their discourses of faith in whichever form they occur, be it as participation, subversion, or alternative to male dominated religious discourses, become the subject of ecclesiology."¹⁸⁵ This allows ecclesiology to be redefined around the complexity of the totality of women's experience as church. This redefinition problematizes binary notions of margin and center. Women being church cannot be reduced to women-churches as alternatives along the margins of the dominant ecclesial tradition. This would be to alienate the vast majority of women's experiences as church.

¹⁸⁴ Watson, "Reconsidering Ecclesiology," 63.

¹⁸⁵ Watson, "Reconsidering Ecclesiology," 65.

If feminist ecclesiology redefines church as the experience of women, then women are simultaneously both at the margin and center of the church. The binary is collapsed. This collapse is crucial because it allows for the second movement in Watson's ecclesiology where "feminists reclaim the power centres of patriarchal ecclesiology" as their own.¹⁸⁶ These centers are the proclamation of the word, the sacramental celebration, and the presence of Christ in community and creation. The center is only complete with the full participation of the complete spectrum of humanity across all forms of difference. The third movement of Watson's ecclesiology is concerned with taking seriously the fact that despite its abuse as a mechanism of patriarchal social control and oppression the church has also been a meaningful site for women's faith formation. Thus, a feminist ecclesiology promotes deep memory that recognizes the ways in which women have experienced the church as both oppressive and empowering. The idea is that women press more deeply into the institutional praxis of the church not as disembodied persons, but in the fullness of their sexuality. Watson calls this re-membering. It is where women "celebrate the sacramental presence of the church's being in their bodies."¹⁸⁷ There is a dual reinscription; women are reinscribing their bodies into the church and the church is being reinscribed within women's bodies.

The fourth and final movement for Watson's ecclesiology is to root its understanding in a narrative theological context. The church is that community which "performs the story of Christ."¹⁸⁸ This performance is fleshy. It is embodied. Persons in all their radical difference, including sexual, come to shape the way the story is performed. The very body of Christ is shaped by difference in performance. This allows Watson to conclude: "The church is formed,

¹⁸⁶ Watson, "Reconsidering Ecclesiology," 63.

¹⁸⁷ Watson, "Reconsidering Ecclesiology," 72.

¹⁸⁸ Watson, "Reconsidering Ecclesiology," 73.

per-formed, by the multiplicity of those who perform Christ's story in it, as it is, and there can no longer be the assumption that there might be one way that is more authentic than others."¹⁸⁹

Watson's ecclesiology is about bringing all voices to the center in order to think and be ecclesiologically. For those presumed to be at the center, this will feel like a quieting of their voices as others are finally allowed to speak. For those thought to have been on the margins this will feel like an amplification of their voices. Recognizing the ecclesiological center already present at the margins undoes unjust relations of power and redoes equitable community for all.

Conclusion: A Feminist Church for all People

The voice of feminist ecclesiology is essential for the whole church's reflection upon itself in the 21st century. Any ecclesiology that ignores the voices of women as it reflects upon the church's life, identity, and ministry perpetuates a destructive and sinful sexism that runs counter to the liberative history of God in the world revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus. A progressive ecclesiology for ecochurches today must be guided by the deep wisdom of feminism. The church formed by this discourse will be a feminist church for all people.

The early feminist ecclesiology of Fiorenza provides an important foundation for ecclesiological thinking. First and foremost, it asserts that women's voices can no longer be ignored in the conversation. Women have the power and authority to name church just as much as men. Furthermore, women have been the church just as much as men. Thus, women's presence can no longer be ignored either. A church that recognizes the presence of women and listens to the voices of women is a church that includes, affirms, and empowers women at all

¹⁸⁹ Watson, "Reconsidering Ecclesiology," 74.

levels of church life and practice. This church is a community of radical equality. This equality must be made concrete in institutional structure, theological discourse, and liturgical practice.

Second, early feminist ecclesiology places a vision of freedom, justice, and wholeness before the church. The ministry of the church is shaped by this vision. Promoting freedom for those who are oppressed, pursuing justice alongside those who are exploited, and fostering wholeness with those experiencing brokenness become the center of the church's ministry. This vision resonates deeply with the prophetic ministry embodied in the life of Jesus and his way in the world as announced in Luke 4:18-19.

Third, early feminist ecclesiology deconstructs hierarchy and power. Among the community of Jesus followers there is no top and bottom. The church is flat. It is a community of equals. This transforms leadership. To lead becomes about connection and cooperation. Power is shared among the community. Force, control, and coercion are no longer an option for the church.

Turning to the second generation of feminist ecclesiology, Jones places the vision of church in the broader theological context of grace. The church is that community that springs into existence out of the gracious call of God. Grace gives the church a concrete shape as that place where faith, hope, and love are fostered. The church is a sanctuary that helps mend people's fragmented lives. At the same time, grace breaks down the walls of the church. It exposes the church as sinful and in constant need of renewal. The church is never settled. It is always in need of God's fresh word of forgiveness and welcome. As the church receives grace, it is called to give grace. As it receives forgiveness and welcome, it is called to extended forgiveness and welcome. Just as the grace of God is unconditional, so too is the church's welcome unconditional. In the feminist church for all, all are truly welcome.

Finally, Watson's feminist ecclesiology contends that the church not only embraces difference, but difference is integral to the very existence of the church. To be embodied is to bear concrete difference. In this actual bodily difference, the story of Christ is performed. It is this performance that constitutes the church. Thus, the church is as irreducibly diverse as the bodies that perform the story of Christ. A feminist church for all will embrace, celebrate, and promote difference, because it is precisely in this difference that the presence of Christ comes to fuller and deeper expression.

Ecochurches are invited to develop their identity in conversation with the rich tradition of feminist ecclesiology. It must attend to human-to-human relationality and the justice needed here as part of its broader vision of deep theological ecology. This aspect of an ecclesiology for ecochurches will probe deeper into this idea of justice in the next chapter. An ecoecclesiology must learn from the past, listen to all voices, and press toward the future in the same movement.

CHAPTER 4

Revolutionary Ecclesiology for Ecochurches

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is simple: to construct a compelling discourse that might fuel the practice of a revolutionary ecclesiology that engages communities of faith in the struggle for economic justice. It will take the struggle against the pervasive practice of wage theft as an example. An ecclesiology for ecochurches must take seriously the concrete issues of social justice as part of its vision. The social does not stand beyond or outside the ecological. The specific aim of the chapter is built upon a commitment to the church as the transnational community of justice-making love that follows along the peacemaking way of Jesus in the world. It is grounded in the theological norm that God permeates the world drawing all things together in the divine life of love. This is simply a reformulation of the deep theological ecology of Chapter 2 as a specific theological norm.

The contours of the chapter are as follows. It begins with an exploration of the place from which this vision emerges recognizing that all theology is contextual and contingent. Next, it articulates the social issue of the economic injustice of wage theft with an eye toward religious concern connected to this issue. The lengthiest section of the chapter develops the concept of a revolutionary ecclesiology in conversation with academic theology and contemporary cultural narratives. The final section brings the ecclesiological vision and the social issue into practical constructive conversation.

Locating the Discourse: The Importance of Place[ment]

Theology always begins with particular experience, because this is where life begins. Put another way, place matters. It shapes our experience of life and in so doing necessarily shapes our theology. To ignore this elemental reality makes one's theology suspect insofar as it lacks a level of honesty, it reveals an uncritical lens, and it is easily implicated in plays of power and domination. To avoid some of these pitfalls, a brief articulation of my particular place is necessary. This will help delineate both the scope and audience of this particular ecclesiological construct.

At the broadest social level, I must note my place in the context of the global village. I am American. I am part of the so-called "first world." In the context of a geopolitical world of neoliberal globalization, this places me in a position of profound economic advantage. The global divide between the rich and the poor is nearly unfathomable. I have seen this starkly in my own life when I was living and teaching in Honduras. While I lived and worked among the middle and upper classes of the country, I was still just a few blocks away from those who were living on just a few dollars a day. I was able to ride the bus alongside these poor sisters and brothers. I was able to shop with them at the *mercado* in downtown Tegucigalpa. I was able to play soccer with them at the local orphanage. Alongside the poor, I experienced moments of deep compassion and solidarity that have shaped my story.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ One bus ride is forever etched in my memory. It was a hot day. The bus was crowded. Standing room only. Both my arms were weighed down by heavy bags after my trip to the grocery store. The bus was bouncing along the uneven, pothole-ridden asphalt. I held tightly to the bar running the length of the ceiling down the center aisle to make sure I wouldn't topple over. Each jolt would send my body and bags swaying. Sweat dripped down my brow. I looked down. I saw deep brown eyes staring up at me from the leathery wrinkled skin of an old face. A tiny Honduran woman was looking at me. She gestured to me, inviting me to set down my load. She was offering to hold my bags. She was offering to help bear my burden. And, she did. I wanted to refuse. I felt like I should do it on my own. I am capable. But, when faced with this act of service from one of those whom Jesus called the least of these, I could do none other than lower my burden. All my theory melted away at this beautiful act of human solidarity. To keep my bags would have been to deny my humanity in that moment, perhaps for eternity. To bear another's burden and let one's burden be borne, across all lines, is something that makes us human.

I must recognize my place as a white male. This is a place that bestows rights and privileges that have been, and continue to be, denied to many others. It offers protections that others lack. It gives power that others do not possess. I must be cognizant of the history that has created this situation. This means I must be especially mindful of the voices of those who have been oppressed and marginalized in order to both deconstruct my own privilege and participate with those outside my place of privilege to work together toward more equitable social structures.

I recognize that I am part of the Millennial generational cohort. The Great Recession was the defining historical event of this group's early adulthood. Right when my peers and I were on the verge of leaving college and expected to be transitioning to the world of careers, the economy came crashing down. The job market dried up. We were pushed out into a world that had no space for us. We experienced a profound sense of dislocation. We did not fit in. We became sojourners moving from one odd job to the next making enough money to just get by.

We saw how the architects of this financial collapse received bailouts, golden parachutes, and new positions at other elite companies or within the government. Anger and frustration were in the air. This bubbled up into open protest, political resistance, and public occupation with the Occupy Movement, which took Millennials to the streets. The current system needed to be changed and still needs to be changed. Those on the underside of American history have always known this well. The socioeconomic history and experience of Millennials has drawn those in traditional places of greater privilege into collective struggles against injustice.

This leads to my location as one of the 99%. I am one of the middle-class Americans who is struggling to make it by. Life is lived paycheck to paycheck. It is life on the edge. A broken car, an extended sickness, an unforeseen expense threatens to wreck economic havoc.

Finally, my identity has always been formed in an ecclesial context in Southern California. I am committed to the church universal and its work in the world. I grew up Baptist. During college, I moved to a Grace Brethren church for seven years. I am now serving as a pastor in the United Methodist Church where I have been for eight years. My ecclesial commitment is not to a particular denomination, but the transnational community of justice-making love following along the peacemaking way of Jesus in the world.¹⁹¹ This community has formed my life and I feel called to continue to serve the world alongside this community.

Drawing these lines of place[ment] together, it becomes clear that this ecclesiological project emerges from within, and speaks to, a matrix of privileges, exclusions, alliances, and solidarities. It is neither an ecclesiology from the top, nor an ecclesiology from the bottom. It is located somewhere in-between and seeks to speak to faith communities that find themselves in similar in-between places.

Naming the Issue: Wage Theft

The issues of income inequality and economic disparity have been given fresh expression through the populist presidential campaigns of Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders. The “On the Issues” section of Sanders’ campaign website during his first campaign framed the crux of his campaigns, which have resonated with a large segment of the American population, clearly when it stated:

“The American people must make a fundamental decision. Do we continue the 40-year decline of our middle class and the growing gap between the rich and everyone else, or

¹⁹¹ The concept of justice-making love is built upon Carter Heyward’s notion of justice-love making as the praxis of the divine “power in mutual relation” embodied in Jesus the sacred community that journeys alongside Jesus. See Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What it means to be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1999, 55-76.

do we fight for a progressive economic agenda that creates jobs, raises wages, protects the environment and provides health care for all?”¹⁹²

Despite failing to garner a nomination, the popular success of Sanders’ campaigns, nonetheless, reveals the issue of economic justice standing at the center of American public discourse.

Furthermore, for the “nearly 150 million persistently poor and near poor people in America,” this issue is not about theory, but about lived experience; it is reality.¹⁹³ As such, it demands to be addressed.

Recognizing that economic justice is a broad social issue marked by profound depth and complexity, the focus here will be limited to the specific issue of wage theft. The contours of this economic injustice will be articulated followed by a suggestion of its relevance for religious communities.

As has been noted, the issue of economic injustice is firmly embedded in the American psyche. Despite this macro-level awareness, the economic injustice of wage theft, while being extremely pervasive, is still largely unknown to most Americans. In her pioneering work on the subject, *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Americans Are Not Getting Paid – And What We Can Do About It*, Kim Bobo writes, “most Americans are shocked to learn that we also have crises of wage theft and payroll fraud...employers are stealing money from workers by cheating them of wages or not paying them at all and lying to public agencies about having employees.”¹⁹⁴ The UCLA Labor Center defines wage theft as “the illegal practice of not paying

¹⁹² “On the Issues,” Bernie 2016, accessed October 19, 2015, <https://berniesanders.com/issues/>.

¹⁹³ Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* (New York: Smiley Books, 2012), 169.

¹⁹⁴ Kim Bobo, *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Americans Are Not Getting Paid – And What We Can Do About It* (New York: The New Press, 2011), xi.

workers for all of their work including; violating minimum wage laws, not paying overtime, forcing workers to work off the clock, and much more.”¹⁹⁵

I was among the ranks of typical Americans who did not know about this rampant economic injustice of wage theft. This is surprising since I have long had a deep concern for issues of economic justice. How could it be that someone like me, someone concerned about these issues, had not heard of wage theft? The problem was that my concern had remained at the macro-level. I had been primarily concerned with articulating the right, best, or most just economic theory.

I was perched in the clouds of theory. This is where most discussion of economic justice tends to linger. The same holds true for issues of ecological justice. In ecological perspective, the size and scope of the issues so easily detach us from the small yet essential practices of real transformation. This is problematic, because it obscures the concrete struggles of those on the ground, those on the underside, those in the trenches of experience. There is a social location bias at play. This is not to say that the big theory pieces are unimportant; it is just that they need to be put in perspective lest they fall into a utopian idealism that perpetuates the very status quo they purport to decry.

It was only through becoming more actively engaged in my community as a faith leader that I was able to see the reality of wage theft as an important social issue. I made the all-important move from theory to praxis. I have volunteered with Clergy and Laity Unity for Economic Justice- Los Angeles (CLUE-LA) where I have been able to support and minister alongside the port truck drivers of Long Beach in their long struggle for justice. At the center of this struggle is the perpetuation of wage theft.

¹⁹⁵ “What is Wage Theft?,” UCLA Labor Center, accessed October 19, 2015, <http://www.labor.ucla.edu/wage-theft/>.

In the case of the Long Beach port truck drivers, wage theft has been perpetrated through worker misclassification. Many drivers have been misclassified as independent contractors despite functioning in actual capacity and responsibility as company employees. In the case of one company, Pacific 9 Transportation, 38 drivers recently brought documentation before the California Division of Labor Standards Enforcement detailing over six million dollars in lost wages due to illegal deductions.¹⁹⁶ This one case is illustrative of the current dominant drayage business model used at the Long Beach and Los Angeles ports. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti has recognized the problem with this model along with the need for reform saying, “The misclassification of port truck drivers is not the gripe of a few drivers but a battle cry of a systemic problem that must be addressed.”¹⁹⁷ Ultimately, worker misclassification allows a company to circumvent both labor and wage laws. This leaves workers with lower wages, less workplace protections, and lacking in employee benefits.

The experience of the port truck drivers is not unique. It is something that disproportionately affects low-wage workers both locally and nationally. A 2010 study focused on wage theft in Los Angeles County by Milkman, Gonzalez, and Narro concluded that in any given week 654,914 workers in L.A. County alone “suffer at least one pay-based violation” totaling “26.2 million *per week* as a result of employment and labor law violations.”¹⁹⁸

Individually, and on average, this amounts to \$39.81 in lost wages per week out of \$318.00 in

¹⁹⁶ “Justice for Port Drivers / Teamsters Port Division,” Justice for Port Truck Drivers, accessed October 19, 2015, http://www.justice4ladrivers.net/Advisory_9_13_15.pdf.

¹⁹⁷ Brian Watt, “New port trucking company launches with employees, not independent contractors,” *Southern California Public Radio*, accessed October 19, 2015, <http://www.scpr.org/news/2015/05/05/51447/new-port-trucking-company-launches-with-employees/>.

¹⁹⁸ Ruth Milkman, Ana Luz Gonzalez, and Victor Narro, *Wage Theft and Workplace Violations in Los Angeles: The Failure of Employment and Labor Law for Low Wage Workers* (Los Angeles: UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, 2010), 53, accessed October 19, 2015, <http://www.labor.ucla.edu/downloads/wage-theft-and-workplace-violations-in-los-angeles-2/>.

weekly pay. Percentagewise, this comes to 12.5% of wages being stolen weekly from the low-wage workers in our communities.

These numbers are *real* numbers felt by *real* people on a weekly basis. That \$39.81 cannot remain abstract. It is not simply lost savings. When you are making \$318.00 a week, there are no savings. The \$39.81 is the difference between lunch and no lunch. It is the difference between living in this safer neighborhood or the more dangerous neighborhood. It is the difference between your daughter playing soccer in a league on Saturday morning or sitting home in front of the TV. It is the difference between being home reading your son a bedtime story or having to be gone working extra hours in the evening.

The point is that the \$39.81 stolen from low-wage workers each week on account of wage theft is not simply about the stealing of money. Something else is being stolen. What is this other thing? It is access and opportunity. This is what the money represents. Dollars and cents are keys to various levels of social involvement and amelioration. Without them, one is much more easily trapped within a current social location. To be socially trapped is to be socially limited. This imposed social limitation calls into question the American ideals of freedom and social mobility. This is a strike at the fabric of the nation's collective identity. This deep logic of theft makes stark the stakes of allowing wage theft to continue unabated.

The deep logic of theft reveals it as a dangerous social practice. This is why it is decried throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. "Thou shalt not steal" was one of the commandments meant to shape the community of God's people brought down from Sinai by Moses.¹⁹⁹ The prophet Jeremiah warned the people saying, "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing

¹⁹⁹ Exodus 20:15.

and does not give them their wages.”²⁰⁰ In the New Testament, the Epistle of James continues the prophetic cry when it says, “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”²⁰¹ The challenge for Christian faith communities today is to remain faithful to the precepts our scriptural tradition by naming and challenging the logic of theft in all its forms, including wage theft. To not do so is to perpetuate a destructive social logic devoid of true freedom and, therefore, life.

An Overture to Ecclesiology: A Brief Harmatology

Before coming to the ecclesiological construction, the discussion has brought us to the edge of the harmatological. Talk of sin is talk about what is wrong. But, this talk moves beyond just what is wrong and it attempts to give an account of how this wrong came about. It recognizes that the situation is bad, and it wants to know how we got here.

Traditional harmatological reflection tends to turn its analysis inward. For example, Stanley Grenz begins his reflection on sin by noting, “We readily grow self-centered and apathetic, closing ourselves up within our own little universes.”²⁰² While sin certainly has a personal component, this mode of harmatological reflection is ultimately not helpful for analyzing a socioeconomic system like wage theft. There is theft, but no single person to accuse of the crime. There is no specific agent to de-centralize.

²⁰⁰ Jeremiah 22:13.

²⁰¹ James 5:4.

²⁰² Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 181.

Ruether offers an alternative account of sin. She contends sin is “never just ‘individual’; there is no evil that is not relational. Sin exists precisely in the distortion of relationality.”²⁰³ The ecological flavor of this account of sin is palpable as it stresses connections and relationships. In this model, we are led to pursue an account of the brokenness not by looking for individual moral failure, but instead through analyzing the social, historical, political, and economic web of relations that constitute present reality. Harmatology becomes the catalyst for social analysis and critique. It is the deconstructive moment.

But, what lies after the deconstruction? Ruether suggests it is a new community. She argues that “the dialectics of human existence are transformed into mutual interdependence” within the new community.²⁰⁴ It is almost as if the ecological is the holy in contrast to the atomizing of sin. To pair reflection on Christianity with reflection about community is to venture into the realm of ecclesiology.

Constructing a Revolutionary Ecclesiology

This focal section on ecclesiology will begin at the end. It will move from an explication of my centering deliberate ecclesiological construct out to both academic perspectives and narrative accounts that flow within a similar vein. From the perspective of my revolutionary ecclesiology, the church is the transnational community of justice-making love following along the peacemaking way of Jesus in the world. This is the community in which I understand myself to be called into, embedded within, and committed to.

In this model, the church is not a thing. It is not static. It is not a place. Instead, it is understood as a verb. It is a movement, a happening. Where justice and love are being made, the

²⁰³ Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 181.

²⁰⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 163.

church is being brought into existence. Yet, by themselves these two notions, justice and love, remain problematically abstract. They only become concretized when placed in relation to Jesus of Nazareth. The way of Jesus in the world gives shape to the practice of justice-making love. This is what transforms the justice-making community of love from any other type of community into that specific historical community called the church. It is Christological.

My thinking on revolutionary ecclesiology is located within the broader tradition of Marx's idea of the radical. Marx talks about the radical being connected with the root of things. Radical carries with it the idea of rupture and difference. As such, it is revolutionary. The revolutionary is that which breaks with the status quo, opens up the present, and transforms it into something new. Thus, a revolutionary ecclesiology claims that faith communities cannot be built from within the current dominant power structures. They need a different source. They are always in need of perpetual reformation and reformulation, an *ecclesia semper reformanda*. The church inhabits a perpetual dialectic of deconstruction and reconstruction. This mirrors the Christological tension between cross and resurrection. The church is the community that proceeds from and carries on this event and history. It is both the crucified and resurrected community. This is an inherently ecological structure as well flowing from the logic of the fallen trampled seed that grows into the great tree.

If in the phrase revolutionary ecclesiology, the word revolutionary carries with it the notion of the break, then the word ecclesiology carries with it the idea of connection or continuity. There is a tradition of the justice-making praxis that is church that comes before us. While the wheel may indeed need to be perpetually recreated, it does not need to be done from the very beginning each time. Faith communities are invited to plug into, and stand in solidarity with, a constructive history of revolutionary action. Revolutionary ecclesiology therefore

understands the church as the continuity within the emergence of ever novel forms of justice and love along the way of Jesus. For ecochurch, this means a rootedness in the logic of creation that connects with practices of cultivation. In the symbolic world of Christian scripture, this is the movement from wild garden in Genesis to the curated green city of Revelation.

A revolutionary ecclesiology moves beyond the tendency of ecclesiological discourse to create an us / them or inside / outside dichotomy toward a social, and even ecological, rendering of holistic community. This community is always in process, standing between the sinful reality of the world and a vision of mutual interdependence. This process must always be social and political. Anything less would fail to be an ecclesiology relevant to the real world.

This relevant revolutionary ecclesiology is rooted in Moltmann's trinitarian historicity of the church that is concretized in the idea of the political *ecclesia* proposed by Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, it listens to the cultural voices of the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *The Hunger Games* books with their sharp liberative focuses, and it finds its center in a picture of Jesus read through the lens of revolutionary interpretations of the Gospels. Undergirding this entire construction is a commitment to a theological norm that understands God as present and active in those places thought to be void of the Divine Presence.

Moltmann's ecclesiology provides the comprehensive theological grounding for my revolutionary ecclesiology. He develops his vision in his book *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. In this text, Moltmann brings to bear his eschatological orientation on the life of the church for the development of a messianic political ecclesiology. Tony Jones captures Moltmann's foundational theological commitments when he writes, "[Moltmann] has attempted to develop a theology that has a biblical foundation, an eschatological orientation, and a political

impetus.”²⁰⁵ Furthermore, his theology has focused on three primary themes: the trinity, ecology, and immanent eschatology.²⁰⁶ Engagement with the breadth of Moltmann’s ecclesiology is far beyond the scope of this chapter. It will suffice to explore three of the especially prominent contours of his ecclesiology.

First, Moltmann works to develop an ecclesiology that is thoroughly historical. This means that the church comes to understand itself in a complex of historical relationships. For Moltmann, there is no ideal church per se.²⁰⁷ There is no church that exists theoretically outside the vagaries of historical existence. The church is always material and relational. It finds itself in relation to the movement and history of the world. Moltmann puts it this way, the church “can only truly comprehend its mission and its meaning, its roles and its functions in relation to others.”²⁰⁸ Yet, according to Moltmann, the history of the world is only one layer of the church’s historical existence. The church also exists in relationship with the history of Jesus Christ. The church is centered by a Christological vision. It always finds itself accountable to the living Christ.²⁰⁹ The historical context can again be further broadened. Ultimately, Moltmann contends “we must see the all-comprehending reference in the church’s relationship to the trinitarian history of God’s dealings with the world.”²¹⁰ The Divine milieu encompasses the totality of historical existence and as such it encompasses the very life of the church. God is the synthetic principle. This means there can be no strong dichotomies between church and world. They are both pieces in the same dynamic theological unfolding.

²⁰⁵ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relation Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis: The JoPa Group, 2011), 125.

²⁰⁶ Jones, *The Church is Flat*, 125.

²⁰⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 21.

²⁰⁸ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 19.

²⁰⁹ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 4-7.

²¹⁰ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 19.

If the trinitarian history of God in relation to the world is the context for ecclesiology, then the drama of this history becomes definitive for understanding the community of the church. Moltmann says the church is “blind” without a trinitarian history.²¹¹ This leads to a second important contour of Moltmann’s ecclesiology, which is a radical openness. He argues that the trinitarian history is one that is open to both all of humanity and all of creation. In fact, he goes so far as to contend that God cannot realize God’s own existence without the inclusion of all things within the Divine life. This radical openness becomes the principle of divine unity and divine unity, in turn, becomes the goal of the trinitarian history.²¹² Translating this theological construction into ecclesiology means that “the history of the kingdom of God on earth is nothing other than the history of the uniting of what is separated and the freeing of what is broken.”²¹³ The church participates in this history. The church through sharing in the radical openness of God joins in the synthetic movement of history toward inclusion and embrace of all persons and all things. This is a thoroughly ecological ecclesiology.

A third important contour of Moltmann’s ecclesiology is its christocentrism. This aspect helps to concretize the trinitarian theological framework. Messianism is concerned with the transformation of the present world. It is not looking to a time beyond history. It looks to the here and now. In this sense, it is always revolutionary. This is why theologians from the two-thirds-world have found Moltmann to be an important interlocutor in their struggles for life and justice.²¹⁴ For Moltmann, the church is always the church of Jesus Christ.²¹⁵ Christ is always the church’s qualifier. This means the way of Jesus in the world must be the way of the church. It is

²¹¹ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 51.

²¹² Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 62.

²¹³ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 62.

²¹⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 127.

²¹⁵ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 66.

in the person of Jesus that “the gospel of the coming Kingdom and present liberation is incarnate.”²¹⁶ Moltmann says it is precisely as the church of Jesus Christ that the church “can be characterized as the ‘exodus church.’”²¹⁷ The church is that community which participates in the liberation of the oppressed. This is the action of the church. Where liberation is happening, church is happening. Ecochurch must press this liberation beyond just the human to the entirety of the biotic community. This is the impulse of Pauline theology that says the whole creation is “groaning” for freedom and redemption.²¹⁸

Moltmann’s ecclesiology provides compelling language for the church to understand its existence in lived history. Fresh words open up new conceptual vistas that, in turn, create space for alternative praxis. Moltmann’s ecclesiology provides impetus for the church to be continually moving toward an inclusive praxis of liberation. At the same time, it names experiences as true expressions of *ecclesia* even if that name is not traditionally ascribed to a particular community. The church is not primarily defined by particular dogmatic speech or liturgical practice. It is a way of being in the world. It is an embodiment of the non-violent way of love that confronts systems of injustice and oppression with liberative inclusion and embrace.

Moltmann’s ecclesiological vision resonates deeply with my own sensibilities. It provides a broad discursive space for rethinking what it means to be church in the 21st century. It also holds onto much of the traditional language of the church. It takes this language and employs it in fresh and constructive ways. It is a type of ecological method for theology that takes what is there and recycles and repurposes it for a new historical moment.

²¹⁶ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 82.

²¹⁷ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 83.

²¹⁸ Romans 8:19-23.

While I personally find this helpful as someone steeped in and committed to the tradition of church, it does create certain limitations and concerns that must be acknowledged. This method of ecclesiology might not be able to take account of the ways in which certain injustices and oppressions are structurally embedded in traditional theological language and categories. For example, Moltmann's text promotes an implicit patriarchal bias through its use of exclusively masculine language for both God and humanity. Another case might be in the use of the Exodus tradition that implies a history of violence and genocide. Moltmann would certainly argue against these conclusions for his ecclesiology, but the vulnerability is still present. Vulnerability will always be present because all theology is limited and partial. There is no final word. Moltmann recognizes this, embracing a "*theologia viatorum*" or "a theology for us wayfarers."²¹⁹

In their book *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*, Rieger and Pui-lan point to a specific mode of practice for a revolutionary ecclesiology. They suggest that ecclesiology must recover the political meaning of the Latin term *ecclesia* arguing that "the people of God assemble not just for Sunday morning worship services, but also to discuss common affairs of the community and to take faithful action for justice."²²⁰ They call this assembly the "church of the multitude." The hope is that this church will create a space for hearing the voices of those suffering under the weight of injustice and oppression. In this hearing, the community will be drawn together for mutual action that works together to restructure the reality of the world in such a way that promotes peace, equality, justice, love, and wholeness. This provides a helpful guide for mapping the practical liturgy for a revolutionary ecclesiology. The liturgy must be

²¹⁹ Jones, *The Church is Flat*, 125.

²²⁰ Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 117.

political engaged. It must create spaces for hearing those voices from the outside and the margins. It must foster solidarity in the struggle for justice.

A revolutionary ecclesiology recognizes that neither church nor academy has either the only or final say in theological discourse. Thus, it will be illuminative to explore two narratives listening closely for the words they might have to say about ecclesiology. The first narrative is the film *Mad Max: Fury Road*. This is an important source for at least two reasons. First, as a blockbuster summer film, *Mad Max* connects with, and expresses, the zeitgeist of the moment. It is speaking within and for the current sociohistorical moment. Second, it draws on important revolutionary themes, which are essential for a revolutionary ecclesiology.

Mad Max is a post-apocalyptic action film. *The New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane describes the setting as “in the near future. There are no cities or civilizations left. The landscape is dying of thirst; water – known as Aqua Cola – is severely rationed; and other resources, notably gasoline, are hoarded and tussled over like scraps of food.”²²¹ The allusions to current realities are not so subtle. In good apocalyptic fashion, the film is trying to pull back the curtain to expose the dark realities of our present world through exaggeration and hyperbole. There is always the sense that this is both our world and not our world.

In this harsh competitive world and against the desolate ecological backdrop of desertification, a society has been literally carved into rock and stone. This is the Citadel, which is controlled by the tyrannical dictator Immortan Joe. Those in power literally live at the top of the society in the highest caves. They look down on the masses below occasionally releasing water for the poor peasants to fight over. This empire is fueled by gasoline and protected by a class of young male warriors called War Boys. This is a world of cultural violence, systemic

²²¹ Anthony Lane, “High Gear,” *The New Yorker*, May 25, 2015, accessed November 9, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/25/high-gear-current-cinema-anthony-lane>.

oppression, and ecological devastation. *Mad Max*, played by Tom Hardy, puts it this way, “My world is fire and blood.”

The drama begins to unfold when a tanker truck is sent out from the Citadel on a gasoline run. Imperator Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron, is the driver. She pulls the tanker away from the Citadel, but instead of staying on the planned route she veers the truck off the main road and cuts away in another direction. Immortan Joe quickly realizes that Furiosa is trying to escape and scrambles his troops to pursue her. An epic chase scene ensues. Through the help of a sandstorm, Furiosa is able to just elude capture by Joe.

After the dust settles, both literally and figuratively, we see that a new community has emerged on the other side. It turns out Furiosa was escaping with Joe’s five young wives. A War Boy named Nux along with Max, who had been a prisoner, have also made it through the storm. Despite initial mistrust and skepticism and against the empty landscape surrounding them, these survivors decide to band together. A disposable soldier, a respected female commander, a prisoner, and five former sex slaves form a community in search of hope and a better life. The Citadel had done everything in its power to keep these types of people separated. Outside the reaches of the Citadel’s power and influence, the differences and divisions melt away as a new community emerges. This is ecclesologically significant. You could say that this ragtag group is a form of *ecclesia*, or church. Furiosa is hoping to lead them to the Green Place, a promised land or utopia, she vaguely remembers from her childhood. She is a type of messianic figure. The idea is that church in *Mad Max* embraces diversity in the search for hope and life in a new ecological world.

This new community now driven by the whispers and memories of a better world continues away from the Citadel. They connect with a clan of warrior women, who inform

Furiosa that the Green Place she remembers has dried up. The group decides to press on across seemingly endless salt flats. The sense is that they are driving over the edge of the abyss. There is no hope in going farther and farther away. No life will be found outside their world.

Then Max has a revelatory moment. He recognizes that there is indeed no hope outside of their world. It can only be found within. There is a place with clean water and a little green that they all know of. It is the Citadel. He convinces the new community that they must return to the undefended Citadel and take it from Immortan Joe. The only hope is for the new community to return to the world that they all know in order to liberate and transform it. If the new community is to survive, it must change from an escapist community at the margins to a rebel group returning to the center.

To summarize, the ecclesiological vision of *Mad Max* is that of a diverse community that has been liberated from the dominant system of injustice and oppression through struggle and that finds its *raison d'être* in returning to the dominant system in order to liberate others through bringing an end to the oppressive system. The sharp liberative focus of this ecclesiological vision is a primary strength. It clearly challenges transcendent ecclesiologies that emphasize individualistic ends. The area of concern for this construction is the means through which the ends are accomplished. The tactics are violent. This opens the revolutionary community to the threat of reinscribing the mechanisms the revolution intends to overthrow. Furthermore, this counterassault strategy lacks the imagination needed for real transformation. Frontal assaults on systems of power are too easily crushed. Ironically, this ecclesiological vision stumbles into an idealism that will be difficult to connect with authentically liberative praxis.

This stumbling is not unique to *Mad Max*. Another hugely popular narrative is *The Hunger Games*. Like *Mad Max*, *Hunger Games* is an important cultural artifact for a

revolutionary ecclesiology on account of the fact that it was hugely popular and also addresses issues of revolutionary change.

The Hunger Games is a futuristic dystopian story about a world divided into twelve districts. This world is marked by profound economic disparity between the rich who live in the Capital and all the rest in the Districts. Central to the Capital's plan of social control is the hosting of the annual Hunger Games. The Hunger Games pit youth from each of the Districts against one another in an arena in a battle to the death. The first two books in the series follow the character of Katniss Everdeen, who through her performance in the Hunger Games rises as a messianic figure who will be the key to overthrowing the present social system that is built on the oppression and exploitation of the masses. The narrative climaxes in a violent frontal assault on the Capital by the resistance led by Katniss. The means of the revolution match the means of the initial oppression. Here is the same problem presented by *Mad Max* although in the starker form of complete war imagery and ideology. Taken together, it seems that current cultural narratives lack the ability to imagine social change outside the context of violence. This stands in sharp contrast to the peacemaking way of Jesus narrated by the Gospels.

Lastly, turning back to theological voices, revolutionary ecclesiology finds its center in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. From this perspective, the Gospels come to function as a type of revolutionary manifesto. An old 1922 text by the Congregationalist minister F. Herbert Stead titled *The Proletarian Gospel of Galilee* reads the entire Jesus story through the lens of the proletarian struggle. God is portrayed as “the Great Propagandist” who raises up Jesus “the proletariat of Palestine” to carry the revolutionary message that “the Kingdom of God is at hand.”²²² Rieger and Pui-lan pursue the same mode of reading but through the 21st century lens

²²² F. Herbert Stead, *The Proletarian Gospel of Galilee: In Some of Its Phases* (London: The Labour Publishing Company, LTD, 1922), 15.

of the Occupy Movement as they construct their “theology of the multitude.”²²³ Ruether brings Christology away from ossification in the past and into the present saying, “Jesus declares that God has not just spoken in the past but is speaking now. Prophecy is not canonized in past texts; the Spirit of God speaks today.”²²⁴ For Ruether, Jesus is “the homeless prophet, and marginalized women and men who respond to him represent the overthrow of the present world system and the sign of a dawning new age in which God’s will is done on earth.”²²⁵ These are examples of radical Christological readings that are essential for a revolutionary ecclesiology. They all work to locate Jesus within a contextual prophetic tradition. This gives shape to the way of Jesus that is always forming a revolutionary ecclesiology. The challenge for ecochurches is learning to locate Jesus within the context of his ecological place[ment].

Conclusion: Implications for Local Ministry

To bring this chapter full circle, it is necessary to connect ecclesiology and social reality. Central to a revolutionary ecclesiology is the conviction that the church is constituted by praxis. The church *is* what it *does*. The church is that community that does justice-making love. This means wherever injustice is lurking, the church is called to those places to be there in accompaniment, struggle, and solidarity. The church must allow itself to be [re]placed at those sites in order to be church.

For the middle-class faith community where I served in Long Beach, this meant being placed alongside those low-wage earners who were being broken by wage theft. This began with

²²³ Rieger and Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion*, 61.

²²⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 121.

²²⁵ Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 138.

hearing and telling the stories of those affected by this injustice. Shared stories are the beginning of new community.

From authentic community, springs mutual action. We have to ask how we can be of service. It might be through advocacy. It might be through public demonstration. It might be through votes. It might be costly. It might mean different consumptive practices. Whatever it looks like, it is concrete partnership for real social and economic change.

So long as wage theft continues, the very existence of the church is tenuous and under threat. Where there is an absence of justice-making, there is always the real possibility of the absence of God in the *ecclesia*. An ecclesiology for ecochurches must take up this social concern as part of its ecological concerns.

CHAPTER 5

Ecochurch in Practice

Introduction

This final chapter is designed to introduce you to an emerging ecclesial expression – called ecochurch. Ecochurches are Christian faith communities exploring new ways of both doing and being church bent toward the end of ecological existence. It is an expression because this type of work is nascent. It is not a type of latest church growth system or program developed and purveyed by church experts. It is more impulse and type of praxis than anything else. Churches across the country and even the globe are springing up, which are seeing, experiencing, learning about, and feeling the effects of climate change and the ecological brokenness of the Anthropocene. In response, these churches are choosing to respond with ecological praxis. The ecochurch ethos is focused on praxis that is socially and ecological restorative as it lives from a deep theological ecology.

These churches are talking about the tremendous environmental and social issues facing our planet. They are preaching about these issues. They are teaching about them. They are having small groups and bible studies addressing the issues. The theory piece is present, but it's not the animating force. Ecochurches are driven by cultivating communities and persons oriented toward ecological existence in very concrete and practical ways.

Ecochurches are choosing to make material changes. They are trying new things. They are tearing out lawns and planting gardens. They are finding redemption in composting by seeing what was thought to be dirty, unproductive, and useless transformed into valuable life-giving soil. Ecochurches are capturing precious rainwater in the desert to use for watering their

vegetable gardens. They are learning and teaching recycling and reusing in new and imaginative ways. They are organizing environmental action groups. They are educating the community on organic gardening. They are partnering with unlikely and unexpected allies. They are taking church life outside and then below the four walls to the soil and very land that is the material foundation of the church.

Through these experiments in ecochurch, the communities are discovering that land and soil are, in reality, the ground not just of a church building, but also of all of life. Ecochurches are making mistakes. They are not doing it right the first time. They are in process. They are learning. They are getting their hands dirty. Most importantly, at the end of the day, they are doing something, beginning where they are at, to address the profound ecological crises facing our world. They are not claiming to be the only solution, to know all the answers, but what they do know is that things cannot continue on the current ecological trajectory, which is threatening the whole biotic community on the entire planet. These impulses and practices are transitioning Christian faith communities from churches to ecochurches.

Ecochurches are seeking to explicitly connect ecological and environmental praxis with ecclesiological and theological praxis. It is about bringing together and reconnecting that which has been disconnected. Bringing together the world and God. Bringing together the mundane and the spiritual. Heaven and earth. Connecting the human and the Divine. This is incarnational church. This is ecological church. It is both daring and risky and, also, simple and natural. Ecochurch is community in profound interconnected relationship to the whole of Life both immanent and transcendent.

A New Script for the Church Today

A significant problem facing contemporary American churches is aimlessness. Most churches find themselves wandering aimlessly through the world with no sense of direction. This works to quickly reduce the church to nothing more than a therapeutic center for conscience soothing for the privileged. The church becomes a type of collective shrink that allows life to be lived with as little trouble and tension as possible. The basic script for this type of church goes like this: The world is generally good, people are generally good, and the future will be generally good. Therefore, I simply need to keep trying to be good and all will end well for me. This script offends no one and in so doing defends the status quo. It keeps the ship moving in the same direction and what this means in our current moment is a continually rapid increase in speed toward impending environmental catastrophe. The ecoecclesial question right now is: How can we slow things down? How can people of faith help put on the brakes on this modern project of ecological disaster?

New scripts are needed. Specifically, the church needs a script that is both ecologically informed and ecclesialogically robust. It needs a new guide for understanding the environmental situation and the church's commission to live as the whole people of God in healing and redemptive ways. The dominant script of modernity transformed creation and everything therein into a machine. This machine was at the service of humans to do with it as they liked. Creation became nothing more than a tool for massive production of goods to fuel humanity's longing for more and more things. The world became a place of profound scarcity and endless competition. The human actors were transformed from dependent creatures into independent creators. The life and beauty inherent in the natural world were stamped out. The entire sacred script of Christianity was flipped on its head.

A new script must recover the ancient ecowisdom of the Christian tradition. It must be a script that re-sacralizes the world making it holy and teeming with life once again. Creation and all that is within it must be seen as sacred. This transforms the world from a place of scarcity and competition into a place of rich abundance and profound interconnectedness. This re-narrating of the world we can call an ecoecclesial script.

At the center of a robustly Christian ecoecclesial script must be the person of Jesus. Moltmann says, “The church’s first word is not church but Christ.”²²⁶ Thus, the ecochurch moves forward by looking back. It embraces the dangerous, revolutionary memory of Jesus. It tells its ancient stories of faith in new and renewed ways. It is a community that understands itself as called and commissioned by God to live life in the world along the way of Jesus. Jesus centers and focuses the church.

A promising example of a Christocentric ecoecclesial script is found in the burgeoning Watershed Discipleship movement, touched upon in Chapter 1, and it’s theo/logic for reinhabiting place in life-giving ways. A primary focal point for Watershed Discipleship is that of bioregionalism. The movement urges churches, following the example of Jesus, to re/root themselves in the context of their local watershed. The movement’s website says, “...our task is to nurture watershed consciousness and engagement in our faith traditions.”²²⁷ Furthermore, this emerges from the idea of farmer-theologian Wendell Berry that healing and global transformation comes not through one grand solution, remember the world is not one big machine, but it comes through the healing and transformation again and again of the millions of people, the millions of ecosystems, the millions of little pieces of land that form the whole.²²⁸

²²⁶ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 19.

²²⁷ “What is ‘Watershed Discipleship’?,” Watershed Discipleship.org, last accessed December 18, 2014, <http://watersheddiscipleship.org/>.

²²⁸ “What is ‘Watershed Discipleship’?”.

The world is seen as a dynamic set of interrelated, interlocking, and interconnected systems. This is ecological thinking. The challenge, then, is to be ecologically responsible right where you are, in your local context. We each work on our own little piece of place. The movement promotes practices of ecoliteracy as key for centering discipleship communities. The idea, drawn from Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum, is that in order to save the places we love, we need to know these specific places, and we can only know them through learning them.²²⁹ To bring this all together, Watershed Discipleship tells the story of the church as that of faith communities in deep relationship with both God and creation for the healing of the whole world. This is an ecoecclesial script that can guide the ecochurch in living out its commission toward God's future for all things.

Having examined the stage and read the script, attention must be given to the actors and the drama. This chapter offers examples of four examples of faith communities exploring what it means to be ecochurch. They are in process because ecochurches are never settled, final, and completed projects. Instead they are open, flexible, and adapting based on fluid and dynamic ecological contexts. Furthermore, this recognizes the character of the church as a pilgrim community. It is always on the move ready to pull up the tent pegs in order faithfully follow the call of God in the world.

The term ecological is being used broadly here to refer to the entire set of interconnected systems a faith community inhabits ranging from the global and environmental down to the local and social. Each of these communities is working from the ground up. A fitting image for an ecochurch. This means their focus is not so much on the large global issues. Ecochurches focus

²²⁹ "What is 'Watershed Discipleship'?"

on the soil beneath their feet, that which grounds the community and connects it with its neighbors both human and not human.

I visited / participated in these communities to see and experience the work of ecological discipleship unfolding in different places and different ways. The thing that connects these churches as ecochurches is not a name, none of them use the term ecochurch to refer to themselves. They are connected by the fact that each has taken steps toward material transformation. They have transitioned a portion of their physical space away from ornamental, or environmentally unreflective use, and toward ecologically productive, or environmentally sustainable, use. This goes beyond the older idea of greening. Greening leaves the old structure in place. It makes small changes within the larger accepted cultural paradigm. Ecochange must be about radical physical change that leads to a break with the dominant anti-ecological cultural lifeways. This is part of the ecochurch's rootedness in a revolutionary ecclesiology as explored in Chapter 4. The material change leads the way. It forms the example. Once again, and this cannot be stressed enough, the emphasis is on ecopraxis – doing things ecologically as church.

Ecochurch #1: North Oxnard UMC / Community Roots Garden

My first site for field study on the ecochurch was at North Oxnard United Methodist Church and their Community Roots Garden. Located in the Calleguas Watershed in Ventura County, California, North Oxnard UMC is a small church averaging 20 to 25 older persons for worship on a typical Sunday. Despite its small size, this faith community is having a large impact.

Together with their community partners of which they have many, they are urban farming on a one-acre plot of land located right next to the church building. An acre is about the size of a

football field including the end zones. The weekend before my visit, they had just harvested 500 pounds of squash. This gives you a sense for the size and scope of the gardening. The garden space is aesthetically beautiful. There is a meeting space near the entrance that includes a fire pit, a wooden picnic table, a sink and counter for preparing food, and a traditional *horno* oven. A tree provides natural shade for the meeting area making it a comfortable and welcoming place to gather.

The garden, which began in 2009, is thoroughly communal. There are no plots. No master plan. No head person calling all the shots. This seems like a recipe for disaster from the dominant hierarchical cultural perspective, but that is far from being the case here. There is a general notion of what areas are used for what. It is self-organizing through conversation and partnership. This was the product of traditional knowledge, skills in the community, and needs, not top-down structuring.

In many ways, the garden grew out of and is an extension of the church's long history of food ministry that started back in the 1980s with migrant farmworkers. When the church could no longer afford the groceries to pass out for their food pantry ministry, they were forced to shut down the pantry. Instead of letting this be a defeat, it spurred imagination and creativity for ministry. They realized that despite being poor in terms of monetary resources, they were rich in land resources. So, they decided that they would help provide a piece in the work of cultivating food stability through sharing their land and the food of their land with those in need – and in Oxnard the migrant farm working community is a big part of the community in need.

Along with the migrant farmworker community, Community Roots Garden is connected with and served by a host of other community organizations. What began as one small garden at one small ecochurch has grown into a deep network of gardens and gardeners. An important

partner in this work is Oxnard City Corps. This is a work-training program for at-risk youth. City Corps brings a group of youth every other week to learn and volunteer at the garden. Social concerns are being addressed through this ecological ministry. The two are organically connected.

Ecochurch #2: Holy Nativity Episcopal Church / Community Garden

My next field visit was to the Community Garden at Holy Nativity Church in the Westchester neighborhood of Los Angeles located in the Ballona Creek Watershed. Whereas the Community Roots Garden emerged more from local and social ecological concerns, the Holy Nativity Community Garden emerged as a more explicit response to the global issues of planetary warming and climate change.

What began in 2005, as a small group of a local Episcopal priest and few ecologically conscious neighbors has blossomed into an ecochurch that functions as an important hub for ecological work in the greater Los Angeles area. The church works closely with Transition Los Angeles. Transition LA is the local hub of a global network that works with communities to rebuild ecological resilience and reduce carbon emissions.²³⁰ After three years of conversation, education, training, and planning, the garden action project began in 2008.

A 1,100 square foot non-ecological lawn on the side of the church was torn out and replaced with a beautiful community garden. From here the garden has grown out moving from one side of the building to the next. Nearly all the available arable land around this urban church is now being used for productive purposes. They have the vegetable garden. They have an orchard. They have flower gardens. They have plots for medicinal herbs. Embracing principles

²³⁰ "About Transition Network," Transition Network, last accessed December 18, 2014, <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/about>.

of permaculture, they are committed to organic gardening. This growth has extended beyond the church as well.

In 2009, the garden leaders were approached by a local neighborhood middle school to plan the development of a new one-acre community garden on the school's property. Working with the city and the school district, the Emerson Ave. Community Garden was established. Like Community Roots Garden, Holy Nativity donates most of their produce to a local food pantry providing healthy fresh produce for those in need in the neighborhood.

Along with the growth of the garden has come the growth of a variety of ecojustice programs. The small group that started it all established itself in 2012 as a non-profit called Environmental Change Makers. Along with running the church garden and supporting the school garden, Environmental Change Makers hosts classes on all aspects of organic gardening. They publish a wide variety of resources related to gardening and environmental justice. Holy Nativity is also a leader in Harvest Westchester, a group that harvests excess fruit from trees in the Westchester community and delivers them to the local food pantry.

Ecochurch #3: Throop Unitarian Universalist Church / Learning Garden

My third field visit was to the Learning Garden at Throop Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena located in the Los Angeles River Watershed. Like Holy Nativity, Throop UU worked in conjunction with the local Pasadena hub of the Transition Network. The garden project began in 2011 and is continuing to grow and evolve.

The latest addition has been a large water tank to capture and recycle precious rainwater in drought stricken Southern California. The tank has the capacity to capture and hold enough water from a one-inch rain to provide for an entire growing season for the vegetables in the

garden. Throop UU also designed and operates its garden using the principles of permaculture. Along with the vegetable garden, they have a small orchard for growing fruits.

Another interesting aspect of the garden is that it has been designed to use less and less water the further it moves out from the church building toward the street. The outer area of the garden is composed of entirely drought resistant native plants. One final interesting element of Throop UU's Learning Garden, which is in contrast to the other two, is that this garden has no walls. It is completely open. This is important because it allows the work to be fully on display to all those passing by on the busy intersection where it is located. This also leads to a different form of food distribution. Instead of delivering to the local food pantry, there are signs throughout the garden that invite those who are hungry to take what they need. The unhoused and hungry often come through to forage from the garden.

Ecochurch #4: Love in Motion: Youth Ecojustice Retreat

My fourth place of field study was more event than location. It was a practical and embodied experiment in ecoecclesiology, which I planned and led as a participant-observer. Love in Motion looked to explore in praxis the ecotheological idea that church is not something static but an emergent happening that unfolds. Love in Motion was youth ecojustice retreat and experiment in ephemeral pop-up ecclesial community. It was birthed out of the dynamic matrix of my personal Christian discipleship, academic research, and church youth work.

Love in Motion brought together a broad spectrum of young people, and those who work with them, from across the California-Pacific Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church each Spring from 2015 - 2018 for a weekend of community building, worship, ecological and social justice education, and community organizing. In contrast to similar church youth trips,

the idea was to come into an unfamiliar space not to serve but to learn and accompany. It was a type of experiment in decolonizing the traditional youth mission trip. The participants are not come expecting to change things, but instead to be changed and bring that change home. Seeing, observing, and learning in an unfamiliar context can help us to develop new eyes to see our own places differently when we return to them. This is why retreat has long been an important spiritual practice in the Christian tradition. The ecolearners and visitors of Love in Motion were connected with different communities, persons, and networks local to the Oxnard and Ojai River watersheds including migrant farmworkers, social justice activists, conservancy workers, and sanitation workers, to name just a few.

Over its four iterations Love in Motion was constantly growing and evolving. The first gathering consisted of just two youth groups. There were 12 youth and adults combined. It happened at North Oxnard UMC and the Community Roots Garden. This location emerged from the relationships being built as part of the research for this project. The initial idea was to spend a weekend working and learning in the garden during the days and then in the evenings we would explore ecotheology together through worship. Much of this was focused around what we would *do*, but ecotheology challenges us to think about how we will *be* together. This led to the intentional work of creating this gathering as a type of praxis in immersive ecoliturgy.

It was not enough to think about the topic and learn about the ideas. We wanted to practice this together, not just in our work and learning, but through the very rhythms we were embracing to be community together. This meant a commitment to making our gathering as environmentally low impact and ecologically sustainable as possible. Concretely, this looked like refilling water bottles, washing dishes, and composting food scraps. When Love in Motion grew to over 50 participants and after three days of being ecochurch together because of our

commitment to a praxis of sustainability we had less than a quarter of a trashcan of waste when we were done.

Ecological and social justice education were at the center of Love in Motion. Following the way in which how we gathered was about experience and praxis, the educational components were designed to be experiential as well. We learned about planting and tending a community garden by doing it with the people of Community Roots Garden. Migrant farmworkers shared their stories as we worked together. We learned about water and our waste by going to the Oxnard Wastewater Management Facility to see how it worked for ourselves. We developed our ecoliteracy with the help of the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy as we pulled out invasive plant species. We learned about food insecurity as we worked to rehab the inside of the local food pantry. We reconnected with our food by cooking some of what we harvested in a big shared pot of soup for everyone. We learned about the struggles of marginalized neighborhoods and the power of green space by partnering with Oxnard City Corps to beautify alleyways in marginalized neighborhoods. In short, we learned ecotheology not from books and lectures, but from neighbors and dirt. Our existence becomes ecological as our lives becomes ecological through how we live and move and have our being in the ever-deepening experience of the relationships which we inhabit. One youth commented at the end of one of our gatherings that Love in Motion was “the closest I have ever felt to God.” It is in the soil of ecological existence that we find Spirit. We were created for connection. We are ecological beings.

Love in Motion did not stop once the weekend was over. It rippled outward in new ecospiritual experiments led by youth when they returned home. Learning from the wisdom of the community organizing tradition, our gathered times would conclude with a Call to Action. Each local church youth group would practice shared leadership and consensus decision making

on an ecological practice to bring back and plant within their local faith community in their home place. These plantings included things like bulletin recycling programs, church community gardens, zero-waste youth gatherings, to name a few. Forests are not grown in a day and neither are ecochurches. They begin with the seeds of ecological existence planted in the lives of ecodisciples shaped by an ecochurch event like Love in Motion.

Impulses of the Ecochurch

There are similarities and differences between each of these four ecochurches. There is no blueprint, no formal criteria, for defining an ecochurch; you cannot sign-up to be an ecochurch. Yet, there are certain actions and impulses that are present within a church that form the sensibility that guides this emerging ecclesial expression. This section delineates four of these ecochurch inclinations.

First, there is transformation of church land and space. There is material change. Without this element there can be no ecochurch. Ecochurches place material concerns over ideological positions. They are concerned with changing their space to fit the local ecological context and to address the community's unique social needs. Each expression of the ecochurch is different because it is local, and each specific place has unique needs. Ecochurches are challenging the dominant paradigm of consumption and production at the most fundamental level – the level of stuff. They are seeking to embody an alternative to the dominant culture. As such, praxis and action are primary; reflection and ideas follow from here. This is an embrace of the classic idea from liberation theology of the hermeneutic circle for theological reflection.

Second, and following from the first, ecochurches stress getting your hands dirty. For ecochurches, church happens in the garden just as much as in the sanctuary. It happens at the

food pantry as much as in the social hall. This is about recognizing the sacredness of all of life. This is a radically open ecclesiology. It moves away from restrictive understandings that limit the Divine presence to certain times, places, and spaces. Ecochurches embrace a hermeneutic of sacredness that sees the Divine Life beating and pulsing in all things. Thus, practically speaking, the liturgy of the garden and the sacrament of the seed become just as important as the liturgy of Sunday worship and the sacrament of bread and cup. Worship happens in both places. Garden and seed might even be more primary with worship and bread and cup being literally dependent upon garden and seed. No seed, no bread. An ecoecclesiology is open to the challenge of this idea.

Third, ecochurches are reconnecting. This is an expression of an embodied ecological perspective that focuses on the interaction and interrelationship of complex systems. They are reconnecting with the ground below their feet. They are also reconnecting with neighbors. Reconnecting with the soil and reconnecting with the neighborhood go hand in hand. This is why ecochurches have numerous community partners that they work together with in mutually supportive ways. This is also why ecochurches are providing fresh organic food to their neighbors who are in need. Finally, ecochurches use their space as a hub for community work around issues of justice, both environmental and social.

Fourth, ecochurches are planted, grow, and spread. In other words, they are in process. Ecochurches begin small like a seed. They start with one small plot or one discrete space. In the case of the three brick and mortar churches I visited, each began with a vegetable garden and each grew and spread from this initial starting space. Each is continuing to grow and spread. New ventures are taking place. This growth is not limited to the church space. Other community gardens, urban orchards, home gardening, community harvesting, educational gardening, seed

advocacy, the list goes on and on. What begins as a small seed, one little vegetable garden, reaches up and out. Ecochurches are reshaping and liberating local urban landscapes. Like a plant growing, this does not happen overnight, nor magically. It is a process that takes both time and care. It takes a whole interconnected ecosystem of persons, communities, lands, and biospheres working in harmony.

Conclusion: The End of the Drama

For ecochurches, the stage has been set, the script read, and the actors and the drama are playing out. The only question remaining is: Where is this all heading? What's the goal? At the end of the biblical narrative, at the end of the last book, a prophetic vision is given. This vision is not otherworldly as is so often depicted whether it be sitting on white clouds or ephemeral union with the transcendent. Instead, this vision is earthy and ecological. It is found in Revelation 22:1-2. The vision is of a life-giving and life-sustaining watershed. A river flowing forth filled with life giving water flanked by life giving trees. The text says, the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations. The idea is that the ecological mends the social. The trees heal the nations. Ecochurch is about embracing and participating in this vision of the God's future world. It is a returning to the watershed allowing the land, the dust from which we came and to which we shall return to touch, transform, and heal us. The capacity for the earth to heal itself is immense, the question is, will we give it time to heal us? Ecochurch is working to help give Mother Earth that time for humanity's sake.

Conclusion: Ecochurch in the Making

The Marks of Ecochurch

Ecclesiology speaks of the marks of the church. Traditionally these are: one, holy, universal, and apostolic. We saw the way in which pastor-theologian Timothy Murphy reconceptualized these marks as dipolar unities of one/many, holy/secular, universal/particular, and apostolic/novel. This begins the generative decay from definite substance to fluid event that is a key part of ecological ecclesiology. It is a type of hermeneutical composting that occurs when the ecological meets the theological. The prior solidities are broken down and reconfigured. We saw how feminist theologians have been moving in creative, plural, and practical ways as the avant-garde of a new ecological church that embodies radical equality, that pursues justice and wholeness, and that leads from the bottom up in community and cooperation. This provides practical wisdom from a deep well for the cultivation needed after the decay. Deconstruction and reconstruction hold together in productive open-ended post-Hegelian process. The question for us at the end of this foray into ecoecclesiology is: What marks out the non-substantial identity of ecochurch? The development of this project points toward a response. The point being, this is not simply an analysis *of* ecoecclesiology, it *is* ecoecclesiology.

Following the logic of Chapter 1, we see that ecochurch is a church that knows where it is. Location matters. The world matters. The situation matters. Every church has a particular place and this place is not external to the church. It is not a dead stage on which a spiritual drama unfolds. It is alive as part of the ecological network of relationships and energies that flow through and constitute the very life of the church. Being both global and local at the same time, ecochurch is oriented to both the earth ecosystem as a whole and specific local bioregions. It is a

student of both. It studies scripture and soil. It is conversant in both theology and ecology. It pursues this reflection and praxis from *within* as opposed to from *above*. This is not a conservationist type engagement of control and engineering but a biocentric participation in a rich ecological relationality. This moves ecochurch beyond the greening of church and its theologies of stewardship and creation care into more radically flat expressions of ecological existence. It also pushes ecochurch toward a rich spiritual materialism focused on systemic and physical reconstructions of life, space, and praxis. Crucial to this is the work of ecological rescripting. Ecochurch is learning and telling different stories from the dominant narratives of late capitalism around life's big questions – Who is God? What does it mean to be human? What is the world like? How is everything connected?

Ecochurch is a church rooted in Scripture and theology. Chapter 2 dove into the rich layers of ecotheological discourse that have emerged over the last 30 years. Ecotheology pushes the church to explore new models for God. The church's theological imagination has been shackled by the familial model (God as father) and the transcendental model (God as higher power). These models have failed to provide a compelling and organizing metaphor for our ecologically precarious age. Into this failure ecotheology has provided a nexus of new images, models, and language. McFague develops the idea of God as body. Gebara unfolds the notion of the Divine as relatedness. Murphy evokes God in the process of planetary becoming. Keller speaks of a "hunchback" theology rooted in process, weakness, and difference. Drawing on the wisdom of African American women, Harris accents interconnection and interdependence when speaking theologically. Ecotheology offers an entirely different set of linguistics, logics, and sources for theological reflection by ecochurches.

With this new ecotheological imaginary, ecochurch reads scripture. As a pastor and practitioner, I know the importance of scripture within the life of the church. Both communal liturgy and personal piety are framed by the biblical texts and narrative in vital Christian community. The power of rereading Genesis 1 and creation theology as the starting point for a deep theological ecology is that it clarifies that ecology is not an arbitrary decision or external addition to the church and its reflection. It is there from the start of the Christian canon and its witness. *Creatio ex Deo* means that theology is ecology. It also means more than that. It means that ecology is theology because very stuff of matter and relationality to which ecology is attuned is the body of God. This also grounds McFague's ecological model at the deepest point of a biblical theology of creation. The ecochurch is intent on reading the whole of scripture through the lens of ecology unearthing what has been covered over. The landscape and the animals are given new voice in ecochurch biblical hermeneutics.

The movement of Chapter 3 means that ecochurch is a church open to plural sources for ecowisdom. Traditional ecclesial theology has reinforced anthropocentric forms of community, as such, in ecochurch these theological projects are intentionally marginalized in favor of projects and discourses conducive to biocentrism and ecological existence. Traditional theology has spent too much time looking upward, too much time on metaphysical speculation, and too much time in the ideal and universal. A concrete example of this theology embedded in ecclesial structure was my 2019 ordination exam for the United Methodist Church. The theology section of the exam asked about things like justification, the kingdom of God, and eternal life. There were no questions asking about my understanding of creation, God's relationship to the world, or humanity's place in the greater biotic community of creation.

Ecochurch is interested in the physical, the material, and relationality. Feminist theological discourse is a natural dialogue partner as it has consistently emphasized embodiment, the sensual, and the relational. Feminist theologians have proven the most interesting and capable voices in the field of ecotheology. Ecochurch takes time to listen and learn from the wisdom of women's voices as it searches for ways of building community oriented toward ecological existence. Without learning to first relate rightly as a community of equality and justice in human-to-human relationality we will continually struggle to relate ecologically as part of the community of creation. Ecofeminism and ecowomanism are key guides along the journey. They are not alone either. Ecochurch turns to ecologists, farmers, scientists, and philosophers to try to understand how to organize both its internal and external relations. Ecochurch is exploring what it means for church to be a healthy social organism instead of capitalist volunteer organization. It is seeking to embody ecological relationality in its life together and in so doing to foster ecodisciples pursuing ecological existence at home and work.

The ecological cannot be reduced to the environmental is the subtext built into the progression of Chapter 4 and its turn to social justice. Ecochurch is a church that pursues social justice as an integral part of its pursuit of ecological existence. The environmental as it is commonly used carries within it an implicit dualism that is non-ecological. Language of the environmental assumes something outside and other than the human. The problem is that the environment runs through the human just as much as the human is in the environment. They are one and the same. The human is environmental. We are the environment and the environment is us. We are an ecosystem of biological ecosystems existing in social ecosystems located in biotic ecosystems embedded in solar, galactic, cosmic, and divine ecosystems. Language of the

environmental tends to obscure this. The ecological is a more constructive semantic field lacking the political and historical secretions of mis/meaning with the environmental.

The ecological is concerned with networks of relations. The social is also concerned with networks of relations but focused upon human-to-human interaction. It could be said, all sociology is ecology but not all ecology is sociology. In the mechanistic model, the engineer is priest grasping the whole by way of the parts. There is a focus on the individual, social control, and hierarchical structure in sociological perspective. In the organic model, the ecologist becomes the spiritual guide grasping the parts by way of the whole. This shift in models brings the communal and the systemic into sociological focus. It also transforms the role of pastor in ecochurch from top-down strategic planner and information dispenser to bottom-up space curator and creative practitioner. It is a pancarnational movement of spiritual discernment from within at each moment. This happens not just inside the walls of the church but within the living social ecosystem of a parish. Ecochurch is revolutionary in its analysis and praxis as it seeks ecological healing and renewal. The revolutionary aspect of ecochurch ecclesiology means a break with the status quo. It is rupture that opens up new possibilities for the church to be the justice-making community following in the peacemaking way of Jesus.

In praxis, ecochurch is a church committed to experimentation. It is event, gathering, movement, relationship, and flow. This is the logic of Chapter 5 especially as it enfolds the youth ecojustice retreat (Love in Motion) into its analysis of ecochurch in practice. It is what Roger Haight calls “ecclesiology from below.” He says, “the church is ministry in act.”²³¹ In ecochurch, this ministry attends to the existential and sociological of the human community with its emphasis on social justice, but it does not stop here. It expands to encompass the whole of the

²³¹ Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History: Historical Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 65.

ecological community. This includes dogs and foxes, rivers and trees, oceans and skies.

Ecosaints, like the great American conservationist John Muir, understand this and remind us of the life present in all things. For Muir, this was the life present in the rocks of the Sierra Mountains of California. He says: “Rocks have a kind of life perhaps not so different from ours as we imagine... their material beauty is only a veil covering spiritual beauty – a divine incarnation – instonation.”²³²

The ministry of ecochurch is a synergistic flow of life energies through a particular gathered community of faith with the prismatic effect of breaking open further life streams. It is a gathering of life-giving differentiation. It is an extension of the creative advance imagined by the separations of the old Hebrew creation poetry of Genesis chapter 1. This is not a reductionistic environmental church pared down to one particular cause, or a small set of a few different progressive causes. This is an ecological church ontologically constituted as it is scattered within soil, sociology, and spirit. The bread at the Eucharistic table is the symbolic and liturgical analogue for the ministry that constitutes ecochurch. The bread is the gathered difference of flour, water, and yeast all infused together with the energy of the baking fires. It is gathered only to be separated again at the table. In this separation, it is consumed by the gathered community where its energy is diffused into the digestive systems of the people who are then separated and sent into the world no longer as singular individuals but as plural church fused together sacramentally by the Spirit.

Ecochurch is not something you sign-up for. It is not something you join. It is not branded. To twist a phrase of the great poet and spoken word artist Gil Scott-Heron, ecochurch will not be televised. It will not be brought to you by denominations. It will not be calculated by

²³² Richard Cartwright Austin, *Baptized into the Wilderness: A Christian Perspective on John Muir* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 12.

attendance metrics. It will not save your soul, but it might change your place. The marks of ecochurch are an invitation to rethink the life and ministry of the church through the lens of a deep theological ecology. If the church is differentiated, it is only so that it can become more deeply a part of the ecology of the place in which it emerges. Ecochurch rethinks church both as ecosystem and within ecosystems. Ecochurch is placed just as much into soil and sociology as into Spirit.

Becoming an Ecopastor

To bring this project full circle, I want to speak to the intersection of the ecological and the pastoral by way of my journey and story. In the end, I hope that this work in ecclesiology will be illuminating and encouraging for others as they ask what it means to be church, pastor, and Christian at this precarious ecological moment of ecclesial decline, sociopolitical violence, and environmental collapse. The mountain appears immense, but I remember the old words of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark where he says, “Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.”²³³ I am continually learning that those who would throw the whole mountain at once find it unmovable and go away disheartened, but those who dare to start with one pebble and then the next and the next find the mountain a little closer to the sea each day. It is in each small thought, decision, and action toward ecological existence that the seeds of a world healed and made whole are to be found.

After my experience visiting and learning in Oak View with Ched Myers, this is the story with which I began this project, I came back to Long Beach where I was serving as Youth

²³³ Mark 11:23.

Director at a United Methodist Church. It was a small church with just 40 or 50 gathered on a typical Sunday for worship. Like many old mainline churches, the energy was low, the vision cloudy, and the ministry tired. The church was in survival mode. It was turned inward and lacked the imagination needed to grow as a vital and transformative presence in the community. With the seeds of a new ecological understanding planted and taking root in my life and spirituality, I wondered what it might mean for the church I served. What might the seeds of ecological existence planted in the soil of a worn-out mainline neighborhood church do?

To start, I knew that this work could not simply be another agenda item on the long list of social action items that a church has. This is the temptation for progressive churches. We think a new statement or study group or program is how change is catalyzed. We add another piece to the machine that is the church with the hope that this new input will produce different outcomes. It doesn't. The same interested persons will show up, or not show up, to one more thing offered around a general trajectory of shared interests while the church as machine continues to clank forward in the same languishing way that it has been. The last thing most churches need is another committee, but it is often the first solution to any problem. A fundamental reorganization of the life, modes, and ministry of the church is needed. It is simply not enough to change the content. The form needs to change. Ecochurch heralds this shift. It is about reimagining and reprogramming church DNA.

The problem is that leading with this radical vision is often profoundly difficult for an organization like a church to internalize. Two things happen when confronted with the need to change. There is a reaction and resistance. Or, there is conceptual acceptance with no substantive change in praxis. I see both regularly in my practice of ministry. This is due to the inherently conservative nature of the church. I am using this phrase in the non-political sense. The church is

conservative insofar as it is oriented to a recent past. Nostalgia haunts so many of our churches, especially in the mainline. This is different from formation by deep tradition. Our ancient ecowisdom is rooted in a deep theological ecology that propels us into the future in new ways. This means the ecological entails a shift to the eschatological and an orientation to the future. The future of eschatology leaks into the present from the past as ecological existence. This is a difficult move for churches drowning in the ocean of nostalgia.

There is a hermeneutical piece here that is important also. Hearing is not believing. Seeing is believing. Feeling is believing. The invitation to the novel produces fear because it is risky. It is not guaranteed. It is an act of faith and trust, a screaming into the face of the abyss of the unknown future. This often causes paralysis and chases us backward instead of forward and into the creative advance of the Holy in the ecological harmonies playing all around. It takes more than words in sermon, song, prayer, and committee meeting. It starts here, but this is not the end. The seeds might be planted at these points, but the ecological must break through the surface of this soil. It needs to be touched and tasted, not simply thought. The church hears about an alternative vision and might begin to question, but inertia will claim the future for the present if it is not shown another way.

In Long Beach this began with conversations around the need for a church that was outward focused. A church that existed in and for the neighborhood. This is a seed for ecochurch. It understands the church not primarily as a distinct, discrete, and spiritual community existing across time and place but instead as a community organically connected to a particular place and community. There is no generic church. The ecclesiological inquiry is interested not in what *the* church is but what *a* church is. The definite is only intelligible and meaningful in the wake of the indefinite. A church is a network of relationships in a particular

place at a particular time. A church, and therefore the church, does not exist apart from the dynamic unfolding of life in the context of a local social and environmental ecology. This is a subtle shift in the discourse, but it breaks open the inert church to new levels of vitality. The life of the church is not limited to pews and programs. It is a site of the dynamic flows of life energy in a place. The life of a church is found in soil and sun, in worshippers and neighbors, in liturgy and literacy. A church is entangled in the dialectic of life and death, becoming and closing. It tangles its members in this. The problem is veiled and unveiled in architecture and the organization of relations of space and liturgy. The church is too often encased in artificial sanctuaries closed off from the dynamic flows of life energy in a place. An outward focus means taking the outward space of a church as seriously as the inward.

This is played out in different ways as seen in the different ecochurches of Chapter 5. For my church in Long Beach, this meant rediscovering a dilapidated and unused prayer garden as an essential place for ministry. It took months of observing the space, inquiring into the history of the space, and imagining the possibilities of the space before a team was gathered to do the work of cultivating an organic community garden in a forgotten prayer space that was filled with a non-ecological grass lawn, a stone bench, and a fountain. Ecochurch work cannot be rushed. To borrow a phrase from the title of one of Eugene Peterson's books, it is "a long obedience in the same direction." Ecochurch follows the eco/logic of permaculture. Permaculture is "a systemic approach [to design] that makes it possible to create viable ecosystems inspired by the laws of nature."²³⁴ Permaculture design begins with an entire year of inaction. You simply observe. You live in a space as guest and learner seeking to understand the energy flows and relations of a place. This runs counter to the overactivity of capitalistic logics of production and consumption.

²³⁴ Bernard Alonso and Cécile Guiochon, *Human Permaculture: Life Design for Resilient Living* (Garbriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2020), 10.

From this slow start the sustainable and resilient begin to form. Ecochurch is slow. This slow work sows into lasting transformation avoiding the pitfall of becoming the next forgotten project that haunts so many of old churches.

Dorothy Day talks about the work of the church as building a new world in the shell of the old. This captures the ethos for the ministry of ecochurch. It is not first about creating new ecological spaces. It begins with understanding right where we are as irreducibly ecological and leaning into this interconnectedness of our places. You do not need to sell the building to be ecological. You do not need to plant a new ecochurch. You need to begin to understand and treat the place where you are as an ecological space. At Belmont Heights UMC, recognizing that the spiritual practice of prayer is part of the ecological landscape of this particular space of the church where we were recultivating as a community garden, I did not see this as a move from prayer garden to community garden. It was a move from non-ecological prayer lawn to ecological community prayer garden. The lawn prayer garden was meant to promote prayer through idle reflection. It is prayer as disembodied anti-incarnational act. The community prayer garden was about prayer as active relational event. Prayer with eyes wide open. Prayer you can touch and share. That is exactly what we did.

All of the produce from the community prayer garden went up the street to one of our neighbor churches and their food pantry to be shared with our food insecure neighbors. This is an important aspect of the project to note. It is not about doing it all. It is not about the church being and creating an entire network. Ecochurch is about the church discovering itself as part of the multiplicity of life networks in a place. In our context, this meant we grew food and others gave it away. It also meant that we did not build the garden. The build was a large labor-intensive project beyond the power of our small aging congregation. From a singular model this is a

problematic obstacle, but in ecological perspective it becomes an invitation to interconnection and partnership. Being a host church for a Boy Scout troop meant that we always had a large network of young strong boys looking for community projects as part of their Boy Scout program. We partnered with a future Eagle Scout to build the garden. Later on, we partnered with the Boy Scouts to paint a mural on the wall behind the garden to sow into the aesthetic life of the space.

Working in the garden in the cool of the evenings led to many conversations with neighbors, which is something that never happens when prayer and worship is surrounded by sanctuary walls of brick and mortar. Before the garden our church was hardly noticed in the community. It was an enigma of a building for most in the residential Belmont Heights neighborhood. As the garden was planted and grew so did our recognition, relevance, and impact in the community. We quickly become an important site for community life and activism. We would host Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice meetings bringing together progressive faith voices in the community. We partnered with five other faith communities in our neighborhood, our local council member, and our neighborhood association to host Belmont Heights Make a Difference Day, which gathered over 300 volunteers annually to work on over 20 different projects that contributed to the ecological life of the community. Projects included planting hundreds of trees, removing invasive plant species from the local lagoon, building new shelving at the food pantry, reading to animals at the local animal shelter, singing and mingling with the elderly at convalescent homes, to name a few.

It is amazing, theologically we might say holy, what a few garden beds, seeds, water, and sun can do for the life of a church. Ecochurch grows slowly. It grows in the margins. It changes the life of the church in small material ways first and then big ways later on. Most church

members would never show up for a climate action event, but they will plant a garden. They will work hard to love their neighbors. They will practice hospitality. As pastor, I am not interested in having people agree with me or that people have the most robust ecotheology. I am interested in lives transformed and communities healed, each in the deepest ecological sense possible.

Ecopastors plant gardens with others. Ecopastors love neighbor and place gently. Ecopastors study soil, sociology, and scripture. May the seeds of ecochurch be planted in all the small and forgotten spaces of our churches. May we learn to pray with dirty hands stuck in the soil. May we be called forward by small acts of ecohope in the face of ecological despair that lies heavy upon us.

In the end, this is just the first word in a much larger and longer set of words in the pastoral project of coming to understand what it is to be church at this given moment. My hope is not to see ecochurches planted as some thing adjacent to the church, but that the ethos that is ecochurch will simply become the heartbeat of churches. I want to see churches become places where we learn to think and to live with an awareness of the soil beneath us, the Spirit within us, and the sociology around us knowing that it is all connected in God, the one in whom we live, and move, and have our being.

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